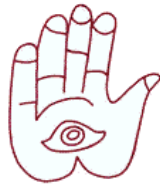


SHOCK THERAPY



Zem Books
Marion, Indiana

Shock Therapy

By

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Prolog

For some reason she could not yet divine, she was in Muncie, Indiana, where she had once visited a friend of hers recently enrolled as a freshman at Ball State University. But it was not the same campus she remembered; the buildings looked as if they had been erected by a psychopath, instead of an architect.

There was a great hump along University, for one thing; the street looked like a giant worm lived beneath it, and had frozen in a petrified state right in the midst of arching its back. She beat her feet along the pavement, although she could not now quite tell if she was walking the sidewalk, a boardwalk, or in the gutter.

She passed what appeared to be an old-fashioned bakery window. But she thought, perhaps, that this might really be the coffee shop she had frequented during her weekend-long visits. She went in, was caught by the heavy aroma of steeping cappuccino and freshly-toasted bagels. The lighting was very strange today; it seemed like the fluorescents were giving off the soft amber glow of candles. To her right, in the dining room, a small group of faces that looked familiar clustered in one corner, talking amongst themselves.

She wanted to join them, but she was too young, she surmised; still a high school girl, she didn't feel comfortable around the big fishes at the College. She wondered what her own college experience would be like, when she finally got here, but instead she

approached the counter, and looked at the woman working.

Hmm. Tall. Bobbed black hair. Pierced face.

She had a rainbow tattoo of an ankh around her wrist. Probably a lesbian.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah. I’ll have one of those...*whatchamacalit?*...A venti mocha latte with soy milk and the foam still on. Raspberry flavored, too.”

“Um, okay, heh. That will be two eighty-five, okay. Thank you.”

The woman rang up the register, and she handed her a twenty. The woman handed her her change, and she smiled as she caught an eyeful of the woman. Nice body--very shapely, and she obviously kept herself exercised and conditioned.

Then, as if embarrassed by her own thoughts, she stifled them, and went to sit down at the farthest table. Suddenly, she saw a tall old man enter at the door to her left. He was wearing a somber, dark suit, an old straw hat, and carrying a briefcase. In one hand, he held his mug of coffee, and in between his withered old lips perched one hand-rolled cigarette. He sat down across from her, heaved a sigh, and said, “Good to see you again, Cin. It’s been a while.”

She looked at him quizzically; he did seem familiar, but right now, she couldn’t quite place him. All she could tell, for sure, was that he seemed like he might be a composite of several different persons she had met, at one time or another.

“I-I don’t think we’ve...” she trailed, off, hoping she

didn't seem rude.

"Oh yes we have. Everybody knows me, deep down in there soul. It's an undeniable fact of earthly existence. Tell me: do you have any inkling about what is going to happen to you, and very soon?"

She looked at him now with a growing sense of apprehension. Who was this old man, with the straggling white hair, and the piercing black eyes. They were so sharp they looked like twin jets of black flame burning in the center of his withered, white face.

"Some call me Galls. On a small planet in the middle of the Andromeda system, I am known as *Cheebar*, or something akin to it. I am known by various other names in various other places and times. But here, you can just call me Galls. Mr. Galls."

She looked at him a moment, before getting up. But, suddenly, it was as if the ass of her jeans had become glued to this very spot.

"Hey...Hey, what the hell is going on here?"

"Don't you want to chat with me? Don't you want to find out everything before it happens? You can, you know...Everything is predestined to the fourth or fifth degree...All the big things. The 'ending things'...You may have, oh a certain amount of leeway in the small stuff. But everything else, well, just goes according to plan."

"What? Whose plan? What the hell are you talking about?"

But she was really curious now. She liked the way the old buzzard pulled out a skinny pouch of tobacco, rolled his cigarette in one gnarled hand, and then popped it

lightly into the corner of his withered old lips. It reminded her, somehow, of her grandfather Lloyd, who would die, eventually, of pancreatic cancer.

Also, as she looked at him, she could swear he was getting younger.

In the corner, two women were busily folding papers at a table, drinking their last sips of coffee, and getting up. They looked professional; short, discreet skirts, athletic builds, and wonderful haircuts. They seemed to fade into the background and for some reason she lost sight of them.

She turned back and looked into the piercing eyes of her strange companion.

“What you say is always true, isn’t it?”

He looked grim for a moment, said “I am afraid so.”

“But--anything you tell me, well...I’m either not going to understand, or I’m not going to remember it when it becomes really important. That’s about the way of things, isn’t it.”

He smiled.

“You catch on quickly. Oh the young are so gifted these days; so quick. I think it has something to do with the influence of *Sesame Street*. But come, it’s time we got going.”

She couldn’t remember getting up, but now they were walking around outside in the sunshine. Galls walked very slowly, but she was lost a bit herself, and he had no trouble keeping up to her.

A girl in very tight shorts roller bladed past, her hair bouncing in thick strands around her sweating shoulders. Cinder was amazed at how the scenery was laid out; it

was as if the topography had become corrupted by a superimposition of whatever it had been like a hundred years past. Ancient buildings kept company to modern ones, crumbling houses stood atop massive hills next to well-designed, cubicle prefab office blocks. It was an architectural monstrosity beyond the imaginings of the most-heated surrealist.

He talked and talked, his voice a strange counterpoint to her own random, intrigued imaginings. She had no idea of what he spoke, catching only memorable choruses of the strange, cosmic poetry he murmured in his inimitable, rusty monotone.

“The world is a matrix of happenings, and all of them are glory. Glory unto the Father, and we call that *love*. Glory unto the Son, and that’s what we call *forgiveness*. Glory, glory, glory; *everything* is glory; everything is *perfect* and *good*. Just remember that, kiddo. Remember, when things seem like they are at their darkest, well, there’s always an awakening after the nightmare. And that’s when you can look at yourself in the mirror, and see yourself for who you really are. Time? What the hell is time? It’s nothing. Not even death is such a cold, merciless task-master. Love has them all whipped. And, in the end, even death may die...”

There was so much she wanted to ask him, knowing full-well that whatever answer this wise sage gave would seem as meaningless as gibberish later, when she strained her mind to remember why it had all seemed so important. She wished, for a moment, that she could write it all down; but she knew she could find a piece of paper here about as easily as she could find an honest

man in Washington.

Suddenly, they were walking, slowly, through a wide thoroughfare, that was brooded over, on one side, by an immense red and gray building that seemed as if it might be on the high side of a hundred and fifty years old.

“Mr. Galls, where do you come from? How is it that you know so much? Like my name. How did you know my name?”

She was suddenly embarrassed by her ignorance, but he stopped for a moment, and continued shuffling forward, his cane beating a tattoo against the pavement.

‘It is my business to know all things and all times, at all places, in all situations, and in any event. I am simply an avatar, child--if you don’t know what that means, you can look it up later, but I doubt you’ll remember. Right now, I am, I suppose, acting in my capacity as a ‘psycho pomp’. There’s another word you young folks --oh, but bless me! You really aren’t so young, not really, you just don’t remember the several hundred years prior to your present consciousness-stream--are probably not too familiar with. Again, I don’t expect you to remember it. Ah, just do one thing for Mr. Galls, Cinder. Just one little favor.”

She stopped, and he turned, suddenly, and now he seemed all of a sudden, every bit as old as when she had first encountered him; maybe even more so.

“What?” There was a moment when she met his gaze, that she found the light in his eyes to be, truly, terrifying.

“Just remember: No matter what happens, you are still a child of God, *Princess*.”

And suddenly she gasped, and drew back. For a moment,

the seemingly-shifting face of Galls had seemed to settle into a face that she knew only-too-well as the face of her father.

Then the illusion passed, and she heard the squealing of tires in the distance.

Galls turned, looked as a sleek, black vehicle suddenly emerged from down the street, and said, "Well, well...My part is finished for now. Good luck. You'll need it."

Cinder looked at him quizzically, and then turned to the curb, approaching the car, slowly. There were, it seemed, several teenagers filling the front and back seat. They each looked slightly familiar, as if they were people that she had been in class with, at some point. The driver was a lanky, bodacious-looking blond athlete-type, with a square jaw, blue eyes, and blond hair.

He leaned out the driver's side window, and yelled, "Hey beautiful! Want to go for a spin?"

She looked in the car.

"How? Dude, there isn't any room."

The teenagers in the car started laughing as if they all shared the same secret, and she heard a few smart-ass comments from a young, thin boy with dirty brown hair that she thought was a local skateboard kid. Blond Boy said, with a cheery voice, "Just hop on up and sit on the roof. Just sit facing the back window, so your legs don't get in the way of my vision."

She turned, perplexed, and looked for Galls, but he was already gone.

Amazingly, without even giving it a second thought, she jumped aboard the car, and let it vroom off into the distance watching the pavement flash past her in a blur.

She knew she was in no danger of falling off the back end, and rested her feet on the rear bumper. Finally, she just let them dangle in the wind.

It seemed like finally they had reached their destination. She had put her head down for a moment, become lost in thought, and had fell gradually asleep, where she had had a terrific dream that she was at the vast center of a web of many strands, and flowing, like some visceral electricity through each silky wire, was pure, atomized knowledge. She was be-decked with jewels in this dream, and floating in some cosmic space, beyond the reaches of time.

Finally, she looked up from her reverie, and espied the largest hill at the side of the street, that she believed she had ever seen in her life. Rolling upward like a terrific, preternatural mound, it looked nearly like a mountain. She got off the top of the trunk-lid, and looked up and down the street, dazzled, momentarily, by the weird way in which a perfectly normal, suburban street seemed to flanked, on either side, by enormous, though well-cared for small hills of carefully-clipped lawn.

A few of the teenagers must have gotten out of the car at this point, but she could not specifically tell if they were the same ones who were occupying it when their short drive had begun. She saw several giggling kids run directly up the side of the steep hill, and she knew, oddly enough, that this was impossible, as the very steepness of it would have required them to bend over and pull up handfuls of earth as they went. But she called out to them, and followed.

Up she ran, and now she understood that her feet were

floating; or, perhaps, it was that, at this particular angle of time and space, the immense hill was in actuality, level, and the house and the rest of the world had tipped over and was in danger of falling off into the sun. She could think more about it later, but right now, everything had grown dark, as the sky above began to become clouded.

She ascended the the rickety, caving-in porch, and opened the door, not-liking the squeal of rusted hinges and the clatter of old wood. But she quickly forgot this, and found herself walking a series of dim hallways, alone.

The tilted and twisted, and clattered with loose boards. She thought, in her confusion, for a brief moment, that she had been deluded into entering an amusement park “fun house”.

She walked into the deep darkness of the recesses of the place, careful, at several points, to step over a few streams of flowing water that seemed to intersect the halls; at one point she looked down into the weirdly luminescent murk, and swore that she saw fish twisting in the current.

But this place was obviously not lived-in; couldn't be lived in, as it seemed like it was only half-finished in parts. Other areas of the house looked brand new; still other sections looked as if they had weathered the storms of time poorly.

She walked through one door, and was amazed to find herself, for a few moments, in some fashion of modern-looking library. Was it her school library? Perhaps, but they must have really done some acute remodeling in the last few days.

A very nasty-looking abstraction called Mrs. Ipswich was leaning over her desk, perusing the contents of a crumbling book. Suddenly, she looked up at Cinder, her horned-rimmed glasses perched atop a face that was rivulets of hanging flab.

The teeth were gaping, rotten stumps.

"Could you please stop making that racket, Miss? This is a library, for God's sake!"

The woman hissed. Cinder started to protest, but then, thinking better of it, turned and merely walked down another aisle, quickly leaving the repellent woman behind in the mists of her vision. She liked the light in this place; it had a cool, natural, re-assuring quality.

Soon, she found herself, unaccountably, lost again in the dark maze of passages.

Her hands trailed the walls, all was darkness here. The hallways slanted at odd, non-Euclidian angles in certain spots. In one dark recess, a sort of bizarre, makeshift alcove, she found what she could only surmise, was an ancient gas stove.

She picked up and moved on. In time, she came to another staircase; a horrible, clapboard style structure that seemed to wobble beneath her feet as she climbed. As she ascended, she saw that it proceeded it landed at a floor whose next flight of stairs was a cobwebbed choked banister of incalculable age. She went upward slowly, into the gloom, not liking the squeal of loose boards beneath her feet.

She came to a door that opened up into an ancient-looking room; certainly well over a hundred years old. A sort of misty, fuzzy sunlight streamed through the

tattered silk curtains. The entire room was fuzzy sunlight fading into gloom.

She knelt down at a low, rusted iron table; it had wonderful, ornate work engraved in it; weird scrolling images and strange ripples; it's legs were baroque animal legs. Upon the table rested a massive book. Suddenly, she found herself thumbing through the book. The pages seemed to have a slick, living, animal vitality to them. It was as if they began to jump through her fingers too quickly, turning themselves.

Strange diagrams, and bizarre, scrawling works of art swept past her vision. Suddenly, she felt a sense of presence, of *other*, begin to invade this place, as if the room were simply the mouth of some camouflaged being that was drawing her in with an invisible, lolling tongue.

She picked up the book, holding the large, dusty volume securely under one arm. She would peruse it's strange contents later. She ran from the room, not liking the choking, suffocating stillness of it; not liking the sense of age here, that felt as palpably real as a dried, withered skin.

She went back out into the dark maze of corridors, still holding the book, making her way through alternating pools of shadow and dirty, dusty shafts of light, until she found herself drawn to a room at the end of a long hall, that seemed to disappear down into total darkness.

She went slowly, going toward the reddish, sunset mist that played out from the edges beneath the last door on the left. She walked toward that light, put her hand out on the little brass knob, and found the door pushed open easily.

The room inside looked as if it had been added to the house as an afterthought; it seemed to have been hammered together from old boards, poorly, with huge gaps from which streamed a new, reddish glare; a desert sheen, at sunset; a strange, angry red atmospheric light that seemed suffused with twirling, bitter sand.

The light in this room was nearly rose colored; before her, a large, slab-like table had, resting upon its surface, a body that was, quite clearly dead. She walked forward slowly, feeling the tendrils of terror begin to lick the back of her neck.

The body was, partially covered by a thin white sheet, but looked as if it had slipped off. It was clearly a man, she noted; a massive erection sprouted beneath the sheet. The muscles were well-defined; the body was stout, pale, and nicely proportioned.

The face was a miserable hole, looking as if it had been cleaved like moist clay with a trowel; it literally caved in above the mouth, although this indentation might have been a congenital deformity. She could not tell.

Suddenly, she became aware of a slow grinding, or pulling, and a clanking as if some powerful motor had been turned on beneath her feet. Outside the clapboard wall the wind suddenly picked up and began howling, as dust began to pour in from between the cracks.

She could feel the floorboards beneath her start to vibrate.

Instantly, the body shot upward, with a bizarre, unwinding sound like chain rattling through a pipe, and with the unmistakable release of what seemed a massive spring.

It flailed for a moment, and Cinder shot away from it. She could hear a sort of thick, rasping erupt from it's throat, as it's jaw worked uselessly. She could barely make out it's words, as it hissed, "Cinder!"

Then, as if the mechanism wound down, it dropped back limply into place. She approached the table again, curiosity overcoming her fear momentarily.

She crept toward the table, looking into the dead eyes of the mechanized cadaver.

She felt a vice-grip around her throat, and barely heard the rattling and springing sound as she stared down the horrid, waxen whiteness of the arm, as the cadaver held her in a strangling grip.

She struggled, trying to pry the dead clutches from her neck.

The wind outside leapt to wild fury, and the sky became as blood.

Part 1: **1988**

Chapter 1

She picked at the scab on her lip. It was infected, she knew, but what the hell. Her life was infected, as far as she was concerned, and she did not know what she could do about it. Since they had come to Indiana, nothing had been right, Bobby had not gotten better, and Dad was

mostly always in a bad mood anymore. Oh well, that was the way the cookie crumbled.

She sat up in bed, looking at the trickle of milk-white light filter through the shades. It was funny, she thought, nobody really considered what death was like. On the other hand, did they ever wonder why they were even here to begin with? What was life supposed to be?

She tried to turn over and go back to sleep, but she found that it was impossible. Sleep would not come, no matter what she did, and so instead she rolled back over onto her back and tried to create a dream world in which there was no pain, no loneliness, no stepmother. No nagging sense of guilt. No pain.

She brought a finger up to her mouth, and began to suck it sensually. In her world, there were no puny men, no little dorks lusting after her, building their own imaginary kingdoms in her wake. *Drooling little ogres*, she thought disgustedly.

She imagined the perfect form of the perfect man: big, hulking, with massive muscles and an even more massive erection. She thought about what it must be like for such a man to take you in his arms, hold you there, caress you, then lay you down on the bed, and slip his manhood between your legs.

She put her damp fingers into her crotch. She was beginning to lose herself in the purity of her erotic vision. She worked her flesh, letting each dip and shiver of excitement play over her body in the darkness. Her breathing became ragged.

After a few moments though, she lost the impetus of her lust. Her entire world began to fall flat with the

coming of the sunrise, and she lay back, frustrated, upon her pillow. She felt like a stubbed-out cigarette.

Why? She wondered, angrily, why couldn't life be as fulfilling as a fantasy?

It was this final thought that followed her back through the darkened halls of sleep, where she seemed to be moving through a labyrinth of hallways that had no end.

She could hear murmurs and wild laughter erupting from darkened corners, and echoing like gunshots in the blackness. But this was just a dream she thought madly. This was only a bad dream.

Breakfast had been slowly crunched: bacon and over-brown toast with a heavy dollop of butter on it. Julia, as per usual, scolded her on her liberal use of butter.

"Now, Cinder, you know how much you always tell me you are worried about your weight. Butter is nothing but creamy fat."

"I know, I know. But I need something to be happy about today, don't I?"

"Oh you! You are always so gloomy...Now, we are going to have a wonderful day today. As a family. If you can't be happy about it yourself, please try to at least be happy about it for your father, Cin. He's very anxious to get Bobby to this new school. They--they might really be able to *help* him, there."

"I know," she said sadly. She would miss her brother -- her poor, *disabled* brother. That was the nice word, she thought. That was the word the other kids at school never used. Well fuck them. He was her brother alright. Whether he was retarded or not.

Suddenly, from some corner of her mind she was unfamiliar with, a stab of guilty memory seemed to jump up from the base of her brain. She felt a shiver of disgust roil in her stomach , and dropped her toast back onto the plate. Upstairs she could hear her father singing in the shower, and she knew he and Julia would soon be rousing Bobby, and getting him into his braces, and leading him down the stairs and out into the car, to take him to the “special school” .

To get rid of him for awhile, because, he’s such a pain to take care of, she thought, bitterly. Yes. Maybe that’s why she felt so much guilt today. After all, Bobby wouldn’t even be in the shape he was today if it hadn’t been for--

She brushed this thought from her mind, stood, yawned, pushed her chair in, looked at Julia, sitting there, sipping coffee, smoking a cigarette, and then frowned, turned, went to the staircase, and began to ascend slowly. On the way up, she had a vision of strangling Julia and burning her eyes out with her own cigarettes.

She stripped off her clothes slowly and looked in the full-length mirror in her bedroom. On the far right corner she could see exactly one forth of John Lennon’s face reflected from a poster on the wall behind her. It was now quite bright in the bedroom, despite the gloomy winter weather, and she refused to turn on the lights so early in the morning; it always gave her a headache.

She was too fat, she decided, but didn’t know what she could do about it right now, today, standing here like a fool. So the boys all thought she was a cow, big deal.

Maybe she would become a lesbian, get her nipples pierced, and a tattoo of Betty Page on her forearm. Did she like other girls that way? She sometimes wondered if she might not be able too.

Boys were such boneheads. Especially the ones she liked.

She walked, stark naked, into the hall, not caring a whit if her family happened to catch a glimpse of her naked or not.

She hopped into the shower, lathered herself up good, began to sing to herself quietly. She was becoming a woman, she decided. Maybe things would work out after all.

She stayed in the shower was too long, just enjoying the warm goodness of it, letting it wash over her form and take the care and residue of last nights dreaming away like a layer of scum that had to be peeled away to swirl down the drain.

She thought, for just a moment, about the strange dream: the eerie hallways; the labyrinth that seemed to stretch out into infinitude and allow no real light to penetrate from inside the depths of its walls. She could see, for a moment, a hated, hunched figure that seemed to lurk deep within the blackness around her. A filthy, bald character with dirty, ripped clothing, and a terrible rotten mouth. Had it jumped out at her in the dream? She couldn't remember.

She thought she had read somewhere that, in dreams, we sometimes remembered what we wanted to remember, or even added to the dream after we had awoken, and that this explained, somehow, how people

managed to have dreams that--seemingly--came true.

Yes, but what about those people who write their dreams down beforehand, and then have those same dreams come true? How do you explain that, Mr. Expert Rationalist?

She smiled to herself bitterly. Her science teacher, Mr. Blue, was always laying on the students how everything could be explained rationally, scientifically, *people*.

“People, Let me tell you. Education and a rational outlook on life are the keys to successful living. People, all of this wacky psuedo-scientific nonsense you see on television--People, just ignore it. It isn’t worth a hoot. People, we didn’t land on the moon based on the predictions of astrologers and psychics...”

...And on and on. It was rumored that, when other teachers were retiring in the lounge for their coffee breaks, Mr. Blue was frequently seen in the student library, pouring over the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Cinder realized Mr. Blue had probably never lost his virginity.

She exited the bathroom, still dripping, and walked across the hall stark naked to her bedroom. She slammed the door a little too hard, heard Julia’s voice drift up in consternation from downstairs, and felt some sense of herself well up from her heart and paint the day a little rosier. She went to her closet, pulled the door open, stood, for a confused moment, looking at her plethora of dresses, most of them salvaged with care from the Salvation Army and various thrift stores (Julia was always chiding her for wearing the old things when her father made good money, and could afford new dresses for her. She didn’t know how to explain to Julia what “cool” was, and wouldn’t have even if she could.), and

selected, finally, her favorite pair of patched jeans, and an old-fashioned flowered top.

She decided looking simple was the best alternative today. Hell, she wouldn't even wear her earrings. Only some bracelets and some perfume that, she knew, smelled like burning leaves. She fussed with her hair a moment, and then simply mussed it. She hurriedly put on some lipstick. There.

She reached into her drawer and pulled out a pack of clove cigarettes. Julia had almost had a coronary when she found out that Cinder smoked., but she was eighteen now, and could do what she wanted. Besides, Julia didn't have any damn room to lecture, as far as smoking.

She lit the skinny smoke, sucked it into her lungs, and liked the sweet, intoxicating flavor as it filled her mouth. Her head swam pleasantly for a moment.

She had smoked marijuana a few times, but she had never, really, liked it as much as sitting smoking a clove, lost in thought.

She examined herself in the mirror. She was pretty in that unconventional, "geek girl" way that some more sophisticated boys liked. Political guys. Punk rock boys.

"Latent homos," she sighed. She went to her CD player, pressed one of the top buttons, hoping it was the right disc. Suddenly, she heard the voice of Joey Ramone telling an audience in Brazil that some of *us here tonight, y'know, still fuckin' remembuh.*

"Rock n' Roll Radio", she said to herself, and then heard Julia, downstairs, screech in a quivering voice to turn her music down.

"Please Cin, could you please turn that...*stuff*, down?"

“Aw fuck you Julia,” Cinder said to herself, but she complied. She knew, even with the door shut, she had turned the volume up way too high for seven thirty-five in the morning.

Bill Rockwell was putting on his belt, combing his hair, shaving , dashing on cologne, shining his shoes, and cleaning out his briefcase--all, seemingly, at once. Hell, he hadn't slept well the night before, so if he was a little rattled, it was probably understandable. Today, he was driving his entire family to Ohio, to the Saint Thomas Aquinas School for Special Children. He had talked to the director personally, had been assured, in professional, yet caring tones, that they had just the kind of program a child like Bobby needed. That they were an “expert facility”; that they could help him overcome the mental handicap that had resulted from the unfortunate accident that Bobby had had as a child. The accident that had claimed the life of his first wife, Jill. He would leave Bobby there for almost ten months. Of course, he would get up there as much as he could to see him, he assured himself. He was a good man.

Jill had been gone for eight hard years now, and he had, finally, remarried. It had been time, and Julia had been waiting in the wings, an angel; as caring and beautiful a woman as he had ever laid eyes on. Of course, Cinder hadn't liked her at all, still didn't, but Cinder had become, with every year, an increasing brat. No, that was not quite right either. She was more of a stranger to him, than anything. And her habit of walking around half-naked upstairs put his nerves on edge. He promised himself he would talk to her about it.

“She looks too much like her mother,” he reflected. He supposed he was bitter. Oh well, hell, so was everyone. But they hadn’t been the type of family that went, together, to counseling.

He had tried that: Cinder, Julia, himself, all sitting in front of some doe-eyed lady shrink, several years ago. Julia, of course, had been willing. Cinder merely sat there, sullenly.

The shrink--what was her name?--had talked to him later in a curt telephone conversation that was their last.

“Your daughter is a very bright girl, but she seems wracked by guilt because of her mother. I think it might be best just to lay it on the line with her about what you expect from her, and, you know, it is a two-way street, and...”

But, somehow, “tough love” had never worked on Cinder, and as long as she managed to get good grades, he gave her an allowance, and left her alone.

He carefully combed his hair, put some spritz on the comb, and went back over it. He had always had good hair for a man his age. Not a hint of baldness.

The one thing that had really hurt him, as far as his strange daughter was concerned, was the way she treated her brother. For many years, she hadn’t really, wanted anything to do with him. He was a reminder of her mother, he reflected. But she refused to help with him, even when he was sick, and she, mostly, never paid him any mind. He was sure that, at school, she never even mentioned her brother in Special Ed--her “retard” brother--out of embarrassment. He felt a pang of remorse for a moment, knowing that Bobby, in his own,

uncomprehending way, still, looked up to and admired his sister. Even when she had turned her back on him.

But, as the years have gone by, she has grown out of it. I have to admit, she had started to care for him again. So why do I feel so guilty myself today? Is it because I think this is my way of trying to take the burden of caring for him off of my shoulders? Am I doing this for his benefit, or mine?

He sat down heavily on the bed, and wished he was still a smoker. He could smell, from across the hall, the cloying scent of Cinder's clove cigarette wafting through the closed door. Her new rebellion was using her allowance to buy very foul-smelling cigs. It was a sign, he knew she thought, of her "coming-of-age".

Why do people have children? , he wondered. All they ever manage to do is raise your blood pressure and break your heart.

He smiled in the gloom of his bedroom, with his hands resting on his thighs, and his entire image as carefully groomed and thoroughly white middle-class as he could manage to make it. He was ready to drive out into the world today, and be Dad.

He got up from the bed, felt his stomach rumble, and decided to let Bobby sleep for a few minutes more. He would eat breakfast first, and then come back up and get his son as ready as he could for the trip.

"Morning honey."

"Morning Mr. Sleepyhead. As I can tell you already know, your daughter is, uh, already up."

"Oh, yes, I already know. I could hear, smell, and feel the angst. Has she eaten?"

"Enough buttered toast to block an artery. Want some coffee?"

"Please."

She poured him a cup, and he felt the curling tendrils of goodness lick him again. He could smell the richness of the aroma, happily picked the cup up and sipped, while Julia ladled eggs and bacon out onto his plate.

He tore in, greedily, and began to come to conversation in a gradual way.

"You know, I really think this is going to be the best for Bobby. The woman I talked to seemed so damn sure of herself. The School has a great--sterling, really--reputation. I mean, they sure charge enough tuition."

"I think it will be a good change for all of us. You work so hard, Will."

"We work hard, Julia. And it's not like we get any help from his sister."

She looked down at the table for a moment, while he slowly munched. She took a cigarette from her pack lit it, pulled the smoke, into her lungs, let it out in a gradual stream, and said, "She's at a difficult age, Will."

"She's *been* at a difficult age most of her life--ever since we got married, Julia."

He ran a napkin across his lips, and she said, "I know. And, maybe, there's nothing that we can ever really do about that. Has she said anything else about college? I mean, this is her senior year, and her grades are impeccable."

He looked disappointedly back down at his plate, sopped some egg yolk onto his toast, and said, " She hasn't. In fact, she hasn't even applied, and apparently

doesn't care. She just doesn't realize, is all. She thinks the world is some kind of rock music party."

"It's not like she runs with a bad crowd," Julia shrugged her shoulders.

"She doesn't run with *any* crowd. Maybe that's part of the problem. She's too much of a loner. She goes out of her way to be different, and people are uncomfortable with that."

Suddenly, they could hear Cinder coming down the stairs, and they both lowered their voices.

She looked a little dreadful, and a little cute. Her jeans were heavily patched with embroidered rock band patches, and her blouse looked as if it had been ripped off somebody at Woodstock. Her lipstick was black, and she smelled like clove cigarettes and smelly, oily scent. She had on her glasses with the thick, dark frames.

She looked like she was trying out for MTV.

"Morning daughter."

She looked at him, and was at once in love.

"Good morning Daddy."

She looked at him: He was so damned handsome--kids at school always told her Dad looked like some macho action-star, like maybe Harrison Ford. She thought they had really hit the nail with that description. She might be a brat sometimes, she realized, but deep down, she loved her father with a fierce love that made her, often, want to weep.

Yeah, to her Daddy was a little like a cross between Han Solo and the Lone Ranger. She looked across the table at Julia, and the feelings curdled somewhat.

Now, what the hell had he been doing with *that* woman

for five years? Julia was, definitely, as far as she was concerned, no looker. Daddy should have been able to do a lot better.

For one thing, the bitch was too old. By about eight years, she figured. Julia had not aged well, although she might have, Cinder thought, at one time had the same sort of allure of really professional women, who dressed in black skirts and rayon blouses, and who typed from stacked folders at desks in front offices all over the width and breadth of America. But her lipstick was too red, her eyes a little too sunken, her cheeks too hollow. She was bone thin, and her blond hair a little too stringy, too bottle-blond. Her teeth were stained with coffee and cigarette smoke, and her voice was husky and irritating, and sometimes shrill (if that's a conceivable combination). She always looked as if she was on the verge of jittering to pieces, particularly when she was frustrated by something.

And, Jesus, could she be a *bitch* when she wanted to!

Cinder had found this out firsthand, right after Daddy had married Julia and they had all moved into the new house to be one big dysfunctional family.

Cinder had been playing by herself in her room one afternoon, several years ago, while Daddy was at work. Well, really, she had been moping in her room, leafing through books and teenage magazines, and staring out the window at the gray curling clouds and the incessant patter of rain on the window. She wouldn't leave her room, though. Not even to watch TV. Julia would want to spend time with her, talk to her, get to "know" her better.

Uh uh. No way, Jose. She would rather sit up here

alone.

“Cin! Cin, I’ve, uh, I’ve fixed us some lunch! You want to come down and eat?”

She jumped. The voice was too nervous; too shrill. She had hated Julia from the moment she set eyes upon her, and even Daddy, with all his talk of “his two girls getting along, mind your manners, Cin”, just didn’t understand that, even if she tried to like Julia, Cinder knew, deep down, that Julia was never going to like *her*. Not really.

And Cinder hated the way Julia, sometimes, would “fake” liking her. It made her skin crawl.

She had walked over to her bedroom door, cracked it open, and yelled, “Uh, Julia, I’m like not really hungry right now. I, uh, I’ll be down later, or something.”

She closed the door, a little too roughly, and then went and sat down on her bed again. She picked up a magazine. Madonna was like, really hot this year.

Silence.

Then she heard the thump of footsteps on the staircase, and her heart suddenly sank. Her bedroom door flew open, and standing before her, in the flesh, was the Real Julia, the “nicey-nice” mask ripped away, and the 100% Bitch Mask in its place. She looked like a jackal with long blond hair and bulging eyes.

“Listen to me, young lady! When I tell you to come downstairs and eat, you do what I tell you! Do you understand me? Huh? Am I getting through that thick head of yours?”

All of a sudden, Julia rushed forward, grabbed her in her arms, and said, her face thrust a few inches away from Cinder’s own, “I know you don’t like me. I want

you to know I don't care. I am your father's wife, and that's all there is to it. Understand? Understand? Now, I am sick of having to deal with your attitude--moping around here all day--so young lady, I suggest you just get used to it! Now, I am going to go downstairs and fix you a plate. I worked very hard to make you a very good, and healthy lunch. And if you don't come down and eat it, it's going right in the garbage. And you can stay up here all day and starve today, for all I care. And I'm sure your father will agree with me."

Suddenly, her rage spent, Julia retreated somewhat, as if realizing that, for a few terrible moments, she had let the Wicked Queen out from beneath the cover of her façade, and now it was time to put the more amiable costume back on.

"Now, just you remember what I said," she put out a solitary finger, and then began to smile a little, not exactly sure how to follow up her outburst.

She looked like she had just let a tremendous fart, and was now fleeing the room in embarrassment. Cinder, for her part, stayed bitterly in her room until her father got home, and then slipped downstairs, while he was hovering in the kitchen, knowing that Julia wouldn't dare breathe a word to him about what had happened earlier that afternoon. At dinner, they both avoided looking at each other as much as possible, and didn't directly speak. Cinder was sure that her dad at least noticed. But it was only the first of many such dinners.

After breakfast, Bill sighed, pushed himself back from the table, and Julia followed him upstairs to wake Bobby and

get him ready,

Great, thought Cinder. I guess that means I get to do the dishes.

They walked into Bobby's room, not bothering, at first, to turn on the light, out of a small kindness. Bill walked up to the old hospital bed, with the iron railings to prevent him from falling out and injuring himself in his sleep. The boy was turned on one side, curled up in a fetal lump under the covers, and for a moment Bill felt a lump growing in his throat.

I'm gonna miss you partner over these long months. But, it's for your own good.

He remembered, in a brief instant, the way Bobby had been before the accident. A growing tyke that loved baseball and sports, who perched a New York Yankees hat on his head, a hat that was comically too large, and who was bright. God, he was the brightest kid in his class, that boy. But then a moments distraction on an icy road, a swerving car, and his first wife had been stolen from him; and his son had had his former being stolen.

You could have been smart, Bobby. Would have been, maybe. a genius.

Bill felt a new surge of guilt wash over him. Was he doing this for the right reasons? Was he just trying to get rid of some burden? Was that how he, secretly, thought of his own son?

"Bobby? Bobby? Time to wake up now partner."

The sleeping body stirred. The head turned around. The face became animate. The sleeping eyes held all the knowledge of a small child in their trusting orbs. Bill suddenly felt like weeping.

"C'mon Bobby, let's have some food. Do you have to go pee?"

"I got go pee, Daddy..."

He rubbed his eyes and yawned. A thirteen year old infant, who would forever be trapped in a body too big and unwieldy for his purposes.

"Well, okay, Julia is gonna help me get you ready and then we are going to go visit a special place today, son. A fun place. Does that sound like something you would like to do?"

Bill was choking out his words now, and Julia was at his side, helping to lift him up and out of his soiled diaper. They would then lead him into the bathroom, clean his plastic Depends diaper, and help him make water in the toilet. Then they would wash him, dress him, and help him into his braces.

"We go bye, Daddy?"

He smoothed the boys hair back. It was damp with sweat.

"Yes honey. We go bye."

Finally, the car was rumbling in the garage like a hibernating bear come to life. It was a brand new four-door jobbies that Cinder had thought looked really smart when Daddy had brought it home. For a time he considered taking the Bronco, but thought better of it. The Bronco had been acting up lately, and even with the snow (which was remarkably light for as late in the season as it was) the roads were pretty good. Bill got in behind the wheel, roared the engine, perhaps to Julia's chagrin. But he needed the decisive noise this morning, to soften

damp, empty feeling that seemed to be stifling him.

He had known that this day was coming for a month, had had the time to make all the preparations. But that didn't make it any easier to let his poor, defenseless son out of his sight. Not for ten months. Not for ten minutes. Not ever. He felt tears slip down his cheeks.

"It's for the best. Goddamnit, I have to believe it is for the best. For his own good. Damn it Bill, stop being selfish!"

He saw the others come through the garage door, Julia holding Bobby's hand, Cinder looking as if she would rather be anywhere else in the western world. His family. Well, he had always done right by them. It was as inevitable as a heavy case of the farts after a big Mexican dinner.

He could no more be a bad Daddy than Reagen could be a good liar.

Then, finally, with everyone seated in their positions, he thumbed the garage door opener, stopped, turned, and asked his wife, "Did you make sure to lock the doors, turn off the lights, put out your cigarettes, unplug the curling iron, and, for god sakes, unplug the coffee pot, too? I want to have a house to come back too."

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes, and yes. All of it, dear."

"Okay. Let's rock."

Chapter 2

The countryside breezed by, but Cinder hardly even noticed.

She had her headphones on. Ozzy. She needed to forget about this ride. She *majorly* needed to forget that she was sitting beside her brother, who, she always felt, ever since the accident, had carried a sort of *stench* with him. A stench not unlike the high, cloying reek of urine. But very faint. She thought her aversion to sitting next to him might be entirely psychological. After all, Dad and Julia always made sure to keep him very neat and clean. But still, she insisted she could smell that smell. And she always thought of it, with a little guilt, as the smell of retards. A stench of her retarded brother.

Plus, he sometimes babbled, and Julia always babbled, and dad liked country music--so she leaned back and listened to Ozzy sing about running off the rails like a crazy train. She suddenly got lost in a terrific sort of mental movie in which there were werewolves, sexy men, beautiful women, full moons, and Ozzy Osborne in the middle of it, in her own private music video.

She knew she was good with images. She had been drawing for some time, and had even painted a little, and she knew she had a natural flair for the artistic. For the imagistic. Well, God bless. It had carried her through some drastic bad times.

Every once in a while she would pop her half-drowsing head up and try to imagine what her dad and Julia were talking about. She thought it was funny just to look at them as their lips moved, as their faces gesticulated. She thought they were probably discussing what a bitch she was.

She closed her eyes and started to dream.

He spat into an old spittoon, ran his filthy hand across his lips and sat back. His head was spinning. Damn. Why had he drank so much last night? Well, it wasn't as if he had any choice anymore, but it seemed like every time he did it, and then swore to himself it would never happen again, he always ended up breaking his oath. Well, he supposed he was just that sort of man, *yesiree*.

But he had to drink. Had to. It was the only way to keep his thought together anymore, to keep some distance from himself and his life. A man had to have something or he might as well just go jump in a lake insane.

He looked around him in the darkness, his eyes peering around at the same drab, familiar sights he had known all his days. The calendar on the wall had a huge photo of some babe on it with big tits. He liked that, at least, this morning. It almost brought back a hint of color to his cheeks.

He got up slowly, let out a very tiny, cutting fart, scratched himself, and sauntered out to look up and down the road. That road hadn't seen a lot of business lately, and more often than not the register was emptier than the space between his cousin Daryl Wehunt's ears. Cousin. He remembered he had to take care of cousin later today.

He went back inside, sat down behind the counter, smoked one in a long series of cheap cigarettes, and waited for some unlucky tourists to run low on gas. His prices were good, mainly because his product was an inferior, low-grade fuel that was heavily diluted and

probably harder on an engine than pouring sugar in the gas tank. Ah well, such was the way of the world.

He nearly nodded back to sleep, his cigarette dipping low on his chin, when he heard the door buzzer and foot steps. He jolted awake, and his eyes swam into focus on a great, oafish hillbilly in bib overalls with a coil of hair that would have made Elvis Presley proud. He stood up slowly.

"What can I do *fer yuns*?"

"Ah, I just need a pop and a pack of smokes. Charlie, is sleeping all you do all day?"

"No. Sometimes I drink in between naps."

The men broke into mutual, raspy laughter.

"Say, how'd you make out with that girl you was *a-seeing*? That little colored thing...what was her name?"

"She wasn't no colored Pops. She was a *Puerto Rican*."

"She was a nigger if ever I saw one. But, tell me, did you get any poontang off of that little *high-yaller* cunt? Did ya?"

He looked dismally into the old mans face for a moment, and then decided to humor him. He put his fist out and pumped it in a little back and forth motion, while making a groaning noise in his throat.

More laughter. Pops overpaid for his Coke and smokes, and said, "Well, alright, boy! I knew you'd finally lose your virginity!"

"Aw fuck you."

"No, fuck you!"

"No, fuck you!"

"No sir, fuck you! See ya later, Pops!"

The mountainous old country bumpkin turned slowly

and ambled out the glass door. The buzzer went off again, a little too loudly for Charlie's comfort, and he winced, watching as "Pops" McGruder got in his beat up old truck, shuffled a minute, started the engine, and drove back down the road. The entire action must have taken another ten minutes, and he had seen it countless times before.

Out here, everything moves slowly. Why is it that life seems to go by...so slowly? Charlie reflected, for a moment, if there was any way to make time go by quicker, and then decided it was no good wondering why the world was the way it was.

"Yep, that stuff is way over my head," he said to himself, and lit another cigarette.

Who the hell was old McGruder to poke fun at him? Everybody knew the old man was as queer as a clockwork orange, and hadn't it been only a few years ago he was arrested for "soliciting a minor for immoral purposes"? How he had gotten out of that scrape was a mystery. But it probably helped if the judge was a distant relative.

He kicked his boots up on the counter and started to fade off again. In his dreams, he was a slicked-up city boy, wining and dining the women. He wore fancy suits, ate at the best restaurants, and drove a brand new sports car. None of which, he reflected, was ever going to happen to him in real life.

Usually this dream segued into his own private porno flick, set in his own private penthouse in his own private version of a jet set playboy lifestyle. His fantasy women were all interchangeable variations on the same

surgically-augmented, massively breasted cyber babe theme. All with black miniskirts, long blond hair, heavy makeup, and no brain cells.

And a perfect willingness to do threesomes, foursomes, orgies. He could feel his pecker grow just a little stiff, in spite of himself.

He sat up, looked out the window, up and down the road, and decided it was time to step his fantasy up a notch. He got up, walked out from behind the counter, went into the back, and rummaged through a beat-up, filthy desk adorned with overflowing ashtrays and half-drunk cups of Styrofoam coffee, and opened the bottom drawer.

He leafed under some greasy folders until his fingers set upon a slick fuck magazine he had stuffed away for his moments alone. He slipped it out, closed the drawer with one toe of his cowboy boots, and began to flip through the pages, with trembling fingers. He could feel his breath grow a little ragged.

The magazine, which was called *Young Snatch*, was the typical, if rather even more low-brow, version of porno bookstore fair like *Hustler* and *Gallery*. The pages were full of full-color shots of young women getting screwed in every imaginable position. The bonus was, the magazines had recently started showing full penetration.

He pulled his stiffy out of the front of his jeans, and began to massage it between his filthy fingers. He was still standing, as it were, in the direct line of vision of anyone that should happen to drive up, walk through the door, and demand service.

“Yeah, I’ll give them some service alright,” he began to

moan to himself. "If it's a sexy woman, or even a sexy man...I'll give them all the service they need. Right here. Oh yeah, baby. Oooh!"

His headache was hammering, but it was competing in his hot little consciousness for his mounting, and irrational, arousal. He could barely keep the magazine from shaking in his fingers.

He realized, suddenly, that he was still standing in the doorway, and so he scooted further into the back storeroom, his cock standing out in front of him like a flesh flagpole at full attention, and opened the employees restroom, a shit-smelling closet with a rusted toilet and a filthy sink.

It smelled old and sour. He sort of liked that. When he was young, he was passionately in lust with an aunt of his, whose entire apartment had, somewhat the same smell. He associated that particular odor with soiled panties, with his aunts round thighs, with forbidden, dripping lust...

He pulled his tight jeans all the way down to the ankles of his cowboy boots, turned, and plopped his hairy ass on the john. He gently played with his meat, doing a sort of twisting-cock-and-balls movement that kept him partially rigid. Then, he began to flip the slick pages, looking for something he could lodge in his mind as a pure, viable, and somewhat realistic masturbation fantasy.

He flipped through page after page of silicone-enhanced, rail-thin, bleach-blond barbettes, fantasizing wildly, creating and collapsing skits and scenes and realities, becoming all the players, male and female. Talking to himself. Speaking in different, heated voices.

“Oh bitch! Oh bitch! You like it, don’t you bitch?”

“Oh, yes, big daddy, come in my mouth...my mouth...ah!”

He stroked himself to that final, shattering point, his blood throbbing in his ears, his passion building to a white-hot point, when, suddenly, maddeningly, he heard the door buzzer screech.

Ah, goddamn it! Right at the peak moment!

“Hello? Hello?”

He heard some guy walk around up front, toward the back. He began to pump even harder, trying to hurry it up.

“I--I’ll be right there!”

Ooooh!

Suddenly, fireworks exploded behind his eyelids, and he shot his wad all over the filthy, streaked floor. He leaned back, gasping, trying to get himself together. Now, he could face the customers with a smile.

Cinder had been half-dozing, trying to block out the image of her little brother, who was streaming a thin rope of snot down into his lap. Her ears were now sizzling from the rock on her headphones, but she decided it was better than listening to Dad and Julia bitch at each other.

For one thing, Dad had gotten off on the wrong exit on the Interstate, or something. At one point, he had pulled over, grabbed the map from the glove box, and spent twenty minutes with a slip of paper he had written directions on, and tracing the various varicose lines on the atlas with one long, rigid finger.

Ah hell, so what if it took a few extra hours.

They had had lunch at McDonalds, and Julia had traded places in the back to help feed Bobby his cheeseburger, and, mercifully, thought Cinder, to wipe his face. She had sat sullenly in the front with Dad, and munched her own chicken salad.

“You know pumpkin, I think these sandwiches use to taste a lot better. I remember, when you were a little girl--well, you’re still a little girl to me--but, when you were a little girl, you always begged us, no matter what, to take you to McDonalds. For a Happy Meal.”

“Ah, Daddy, I just wanted the toy surprise inside.”

“Yeah right. They always had some cheap, junk toy inside. Some movie promotion, or something. Ah, those were the days, weren’t they Punky? Jeez, what happens to the time?”

She chewed silently for a moment and considered. True, she didn’t feel old...but what if one didn’t feel old for many years, but grew old and decrepit anyway? What if age was something that just slipped across you like a fog, until, before you knew any better, you were sixty, and everyone around you had died, and no one found you attractive, anymore. She could conceive a day when she looked into the mirror, and, instead of seeing her own, young, geeky, half-way attractive self, she would see a withered old crone staring back at her. She suddenly didn’t have much of an appetite.

“Dad, do you think this school will really be able to help Bobby? I mean, uh...Will he be happy there, do ya think?”

Bill suddenly looked a little less cheery. A little less

certain.

“Yes. Honey. I think he will...I know he will. I have to believe that.”

“I know Daddy. Daddy, I love you.”

“I love you to, Punky.”

Suddenly, Julia’s voice grated from the backseat.

“Oh, will you two stop being so serious, please?”

She tried to sound as if she was joking, but even Daddy could tell, Cinder was sure, that Julia was exposing some of the jealousy she tried so hard to keep hidden beneath her icy bitch exterior. Hell, her relationship with Daddy was so special, Cinder knew, that it was a place that Julia found alien, and uncomfortable. Well, fuck her. Cinder suddenly felt good all over.

Then, it was back out onto the roads of Northeastern Kentucky, trying to figure out, exactly, how the hell to get Bobby to this special retreat.

“I must have taken the wrong exit,” he said irritably. “That’s all there is too it. I just wonder how the hell we get back to where we need to go. None of this looks familiar.”

Indeed, the landscape of farms and rotting barns, and old clapboard houses looked very familiar to anyone from the Midwest, Cinder thought, but knew better than to speak when Daddy was trying hard to concentrate.

“Lessee...70 to 75, to I-64...goes into Lexington...Ashland is here, go any further across and we’d have crossed into West Virginia...Town of Newport just twenty two miles away. Where in the hell am I?”

"I'm sure I don't know dear. Why don't you stop and ask directions."

"Julia...I have it under control."

"I'm sure dear. But we've been driving for over two hours and not getting anywhere. WHY DON'T YOU STOP AND ASK DIRECTIONS?"

Bitch.

"Hey, as soon as I find someplace to stop...okay. But, I am only human, Julia."

Evil bitch. Why didn't she just stay home today? Make this a real family affair.

Cinder leaned back in her seat, popped her headphones back on, and changed the tape from *Ozzy*, to *Nick Cave*. When passing through an area of country this desolate, it was *Nick Cave*, or it was nothing at all.

On the longest, most unforgiving stretch of back road, situated between a stand of trees and a low, marshy field. Daddy found the most forlorn, desolate old-fashioned gas station in North America.

"Jeezus, is this place even open for business?" he asked himself, turning into the parking lot while Julia leaned back in her seat, looked vaguely, and somewhat disgustedly out the passenger side window, and chewed her bottom lip.

Cinder clicked off her headphones, and decided to get out. She was really starting to need a smoke, and besides, the music was only really good if you were still traveling.

"Hey Julia," she said, probably a little too loudly.

"Huh?"

"I need a smoke. Could you please?"

Julia huffed a sigh, opened her door, thrust her skinny, too-pale legs out the door, got out in a sort of exasperated huff, pushed her seat back, and said, "Just watch out for Bobby, okay?"

As if I need to be reminded. Bitch.

Cinder carefully got out, making sure not to bump or disturb her brother, who despite all the excitement, had managed, it seemed, to lull himself back to sleep.

Cinder got out, sliding carefully past Julia, who got back in the car in the same quick, exasperated huff. Cinder proudly took her pack of Djharum black out of her pocket, took one long, skinny black stick out, and lit up.

"Hey, Cin, make sure you stand away from the pumps, okay?"

She half-turned, shot Julia a little glance, as if to say, *I had every intention of blowing us to kingdom come*, and walked to the edge of the lot, facing out into the road. She was starting, for some reason, to like today a lot less.

Bill entered the filthy little gas station with a shake of his head, and his road atlas. Well, maybe a local could shed some light on this. But he was sure he had gotten the directions right on the phone. And he wasn't the sort of man that would just take off, half-cocked, without knowing *exactly* where he was going.

The station, which bore the somewhat ironic name of "Wehunt Gas", was seemingly still open for whatever passed for business here. He strolled up to the counter, waited a long moment, expecting the employee to emerge from the back, and drummed his fingers against the

greasy countertop.

He could hear, beyond the open storeroom door, a faint, muffled groaning, and for a moment he was half-way convinced that, maybe, they had happened upon a robbery in progress...or one that had just occurred. Were was the clerk? Tied up in back?

He walked into the dimly-lit storeroom and around a corner bulkhead of cardboard boxes, his shoes scraping on the gritty floor. Damn, there was an inch of muck on the cement back here, at least.

He heard the groaning come from the only door labeled *men*.

He knocked, briskly.

"H-hello? Sir?"

Silence.

"J-just a minute, man! I'll be right there."

Either he has explosive diarrhea, or he's keeping a date with Rosy Palmer and her five sisters. Either way, I need service quickly.

"Okay. Just making sure everything is alright."

Bill walked back out to the counter. In a few moments, and with a trickling flush, a scrubby young man with greasy hair, a Confederate Flag cap, heavy tattoos, and dirty blue work shirt with the arms ripped out, emerged and flashed an ugly grin. He was, predictably, missing some front teeth. He likewise, predictably, had not shaved, showered, or seemingly cleaned beneath his fingernails in what, presumably, might have been months. Maybe...years.

He smelled like a combination of motor oil, body odor, cigarettes, and cheap booze. Bill guessed that his name

might be Vern.

“What can I do *fer yuns*?”

Bill looked at him for a moment, trying to stifle a lopsided grin. He thought he had caught the man moaning something along the lines of, “Oh baby, give it to me one more time.”

Suddenly, for a reason he could not fathom, he asked , innocently, “What were you doing back there?”

“Taking a shit.”

“Ah. Well, I guess we all gotta do that now and again...lemme see. Well I need eight dollars gas.”

“Okay.” The man said slowly. His eyes were bloodshot, and his breath didn’t smell like roses, but Bill realized he was trying to do his job at least, so.

“I uh...my family and I are from Indiana, and we are trying to get my son to school here. The, uh, well, maybe you’ve heard of it: Saint Thomas Aquinas School?”

Pause.

“No. Nope, can’t say that I have.”

The young man shook his head. His “can’t” was pronounced *cain’t*.

“Well, here are the directions. Um, and here is my map. And, um, well, could you just maybe? Uh maybe, take a look?”

Bill put the map and the directions down on the counter, and the young man looked slightly irritated. He thrust one skinny, tattooed arm onto the counter, leaned over, and stank to high heaven.

“Well, let’s see here Mister. Um, well, how did you come in? You’re in Pleasant Point, by the way. We don’t get many people through here that ain’t from around.

You know, it's mostly just a bunch of old farmers and *sheepfuckers*. Pardon my French."

"Well, we got off on 69, and I could have swore I got off on the wrong exist...but, all we've seen so far is a bunch of country that doesn't look familiar. At least not to me. And I come to Kentucky quite a bit for business."

He looked down at the Road Atlas. All the lines seemed to be intersecting, skinny snakes. He hadn't bothered to explain to this fancy fucker that he couldn't read a map to save his life.

Couldn't read period.

"Well, all I can tell you is that road should lead you back up to the Interstate if you just keep on following it."

He stood up on wobbly legs, and was ready to take the money for the gas and be done with it when, all of a sudden, he glanced out the long window over the cigarette rack and spied one lone, solitary female standing smoking at the edge of the tarmac. Suddenly, a pale flicker of a thought crossed his mind. A sort of silent signal hidden deep within the recesses of his hot little brain. It was secured tightly in the same part of himself that dissolved when he ambled at five in the morning to work. It was like an invisible fiber of nerves in a second skin.

He was having the flashes of a fever dream.

"You know, actually, if you all want to save yourself some time," he began slowly, "and cut out a lot of backtracking, you might try driving into Pleasant Point and asking the Sheriff over there. Dale Aubrey. He's a good buddy of mine. He could sure as shit tell you how to get there. Me, I'm just a dumb gas station clerk. What

the hell do I know?"

He smiled and made a little forced laugh, but his mind was zeroing in, almost against his will, on other subjects.

Bill stood up straight, looked glum, said, "Well, I do need to be back at a reasonable hour. You know, *work*. How far away is Pleasant Point?"

"Huh? Oh, Pleasant Point. Well, you're in *Mount Pleasant* now. If you want to drive into town, just go north all the way down until you reach the first intersecting road, hook a right, take that road till you get to the tracks, hook another right, and follow that all the way down to Main. Sheriff's Station is right there. *Cain't* miss it."

Pause.

"Probably only take you fifteen minutes or so."

Bill straightened up, began to fold his McMann Realty 2005 Road Atlas, and frowned. He stood for a moment, looking down at a dying fly straggling it's way across the floor toward infinity.

"Thanks. Oh, yeah, here."

He handed the clerk a ten and said, "keep the change."

"Thank you, sir. Hope you and yours have a good day, and find that there school you're looking for."

"Yeah. Have a nice day."

Dumbass.

He watched him walk over to his nice new car, open the gas tank, pump, close the tank, and get in. He started fussing with his wife about something, and even from here Charlie could tell that, hot damn, she was a looker too. Just like the daughter, except long blond hair, he thought.

Fancy fucker. High-living, rich, *educated* sumbitch. What he wouldn't like to walk out there right now, take that son of a bitch's wife by her scrawny neck, and twist until his pecker got hard.

Yeah, go on. Drive on down to Pleasant Point. See how far you get on our watered-down gas. Make sure to tell Sheriff Aubrey I said hi.

Oh, by the way--he's still hanging from a tree in town square.

Chapter 3

The planned visit to Pleasant Point did nothing to help the situation.

The sun was starting to dip below the horizon now, and Cinder realized, with a faint twinge of unease, that the day had not gone right at all. Daddy was swearing a lot now, moving up and down dusty roads, through fields, kicking up dirt, and trying in vain to get oriented to where he was. The roads out here were old, crumbling; the road signs seemed to be all wrong, or in some places simply didn't exist, and now Julia was sitting as rigid as a pole, the skin around her lips knotting into a tight little bow.

What was worse, after all the sleep, Bobby had woken up and become very talkative. The mood inside the car was getting progressively sour.

"Look at the cows Daddy. Daddy look at the cows. Cows. Daddy. I like the cows. *Looker see!*"

"I SEE THE COWS BOBBY."

"Bill, don't snap at him."

Silence.

"I just. Don't. Get it. Was the sonofabitch lying to me? Did I take another wrong turn?"

"Jesus Christ, Bill, he probably just wanted to have a laugh getting the Hoosiers to drive way out of their way...getting us lost. I mean, you said he was a hick. A redneck...he probably resented you or, something. Were you arrogant? Did you piss him off?"

Daddy looked as perplexed as he ever had, Cinder thought, but she knew better than to open her trap now. Bobby was still babbling, talking about cows, spacemen, a trip to a cartoon show...Julia, she knew, was not helping the situation any.

The car plummeted through the dips and valleys, past rolling hills and fenced in pastures, and a succession of cows that didn't, at all, look healthy. The entire world now seemed if it was one long, endless panorama of run-to-riot yards, rusted cars on cinderblocks, weathered houses, and forgotten, blackened graveyards.

Cinder looked at as they passed one of these. The headstones were, probably, all unreadable now. Cracked, lying on their sides; what vandals had not desecrated, time and the elements had. She shuddered.

Suddenly, she felt cut off from the world, in a way in which she was not, entirely familiar with. It was a little like waking up in the wee hours of the morning, when everyone else in the house was asleep. Was everyone in the world, finally, all alone when one got right down to it? Didn't those old cemeteries somehow prove that?

After all, everyone, eventually, went out of the world

alone. But nobody entered it alone--which was strange to consider.

It takes a doctor to help you be born, but you can die all on your own. What a happy thought for the evening.

Suddenly:

"I want to go home, Daddy. I think we should just try to find our way back and go home."

She had tried to sound annoyed, but she realized she sounded more scared than anything. The incorrect pitch of her voice had betrayed a faint, tremulous quality that let both of them know that she was starting to become afraid.

"Honey, I would be more than happy to turn around right now. If I knew where the hell to turn around at. I feel like I've been driving in circles for two hours. And I haven't seen one service station yet. Not one."

Around them, fields stretched out into the gathering darkness.

"I'm not really worried, Hon. I mean, if worse comes o worse, there has got to be someone out here that will let us use their phone. Hell, farm people are usually pretty friendly. They may even put us up for the night. Bobby could get up in the morning and help them milk the cows. Couldn't ya, sport?"

He tried to sound calm, but in reality his nerves were more than set on edge. He hadn't seen any friendly-looking farm houses out here for miles. In fact, nearly every house he had seen looked, well, abandoned. Fields were weed-choked; tractors stood like rusted skeletons of an agricultural era that had long since been shoveled into the earth.

The last straw was when the car broke down. Well, technically, ran out of gas. In the middle of nowhere. Bill managed to guide it to the side of the road, and they sat there for a few moments in confused silence.

They had seen only one other vehicle in the hours that they had driven, and that had been yet another rusted old truck that barreled past them without paying them any mind.

Bill leaned back, sighed, yawned, looked around at his family, and said, " Well, gang. It looks like we've finally hit rock bottom today. I don't know what happened exactly. I guess, maybe, it's Murphy's Law--that said, we have two options. We can stay here and hope a State Policeman comes by, or maybe, just maybe, a friendly local. In which case we could be waiting awhile. Or."

Julia looked at him tiredly. It was now fully dark, although it was not, really, late. Maybe seven o'clock.

"Or, what? Bill? Bill?"

He turned and looked at her.

"Well, I think it would be best if you guys wait here. Now, surely, there must be someplace up the road a mile or two. With a phone. Maybe even a cop. Hell. We're in America. You can't get lost anymore. Not in America."

Julia fairly hissed, put her forehead in her hand, and said, "Jesus Bill, how in the hell could you have gotten the goddamned directions to the goddamned school so goddamned screwed up? Weren't you paying attention? And why the hell did you decide to listen to that idiot clerk?"

He looked at her suddenly as if he could knock the

living shit out of her, and Cinder realized that Daddy was *mucho* upset. Well, she didn't blame him one bit. And she sure as hell didn't want him to go out there and walk alone to the nearest town.

"Daddy no! Please don't go, I'm scared."

Bill looked back at Cinder. In truth, he was just a little skittish himself at this point. Hell, the way things had gone today, he wasn't, exactly, sure what would happen if he got out and started down that road. In light of the situation he could, perhaps, be forgiven for feeling unlucky.

"I'll be fine, Pumpkin. C'mon. You're always going on about being a big girl. About being all grown up. Now, we're probably just right outside of Pleasant Point. I'll walk up ahead. Maybe--God, surely--there is someone living on one of these old farms who will let me use the phone."

"Bill, are you sure you know what you're doing? I mean, what if there are big dogs or something. If you go out there and get bit by something I don't know what the hell we'd do!"

Bitch. All you ever think about is yourself.

Cinder felt a swell of panic begin to grip her, and did her best to fight it back. Hell, she had always seen Daddy as some kind of superhero. Maybe, with a little luck, he could get a cop to come and drive them to the nearest hotel. Then, Daddy would get a rent-a-car, and they would all drive back to Indianapolis, and Bobby would not go to the special school after all. Because Daddy would not think of driving down to this particular, bassackwards area of Kentucky ever again. Too many bad

omens, and she knew full well that, deep down, Daddy knew when God was trying to tell him something.

“Bill, at least take the map with you--”

“That map has done no damn good all day!” He rubbed his eyes tiredly. He wasn’t in the mood for a long, lonely walk, but he was the Man of the House. And, well, when duty called...

“All of these goddamn roads have been unmarked. Not on the map. I can’t make heads or tails of anything tonight, and frankly, all I want to do is get to a hotel or something, get something to eat; sleep. We might be able to convince somebody to let us sleep in their house tonight. Hell, I’m carrying enough cash to sweeten the deal. I’ll take the flashlight. You know I was a Marine for five years. I can take care of myself.”

He leaned over, kissed Julia, and then turned back and looked at his children.

“Honey, I promise, if I don’t find anything I’ll be back in an hour.”

Cinder looked down at her lap, nodded, said, “*Okay, Daddy.*”

He knew she was choking back frightened tears, and he didn’t want to leave them, particularly. But they couldn’t very well stay there all night, just because he, himself, was now spooked. He thumbed Bobby’s cap, told him he loved him, and watched, for a moment as the boy stirred. He turned back around, opened the glove box, and took out a small handgun.

“This shoots flares. If anything happens--”

“Bill!”

“I said *if* anything happens, don’t hesitate to use this. It

will blow a hole in something as big as your fist. I know you can use a gun Julia. See you in a little bit.”

And with that, and heaving a gusty sigh, he opened his door, got out, and closed, it, leaning back into the window and saying, “I’ll be back. Roll up the windows and make sure all your doors are locked. I love you guys.”

He began to walk, and Julia leaned over and turned on the headlights, to give him some illumination. Some comfort, in the night.

Cinder watched her Daddy walk away slowly, swinging his arms with a confidence that she knew must, surely, be slipping a bit. His figure was ghostly in the headlight glow. She couldn’t stop watching his image slip away.

An odd silence settled in in the car. The only sound was rumbling stomachs, cicada, and occasional tired sigh.

“Julia.”

Silence.

“What dear?”

“I’m really scared.”

“I know. It will be okay. Your dad is a tough, brave man. He’ll be back soon.”

Julia cradled the flare gun in her lap.

“Do you want to get out for awhile and stretch your legs? I need a smoke, anyway.”

“Yeah, so do I. Bobby? Bobby?”

Cinder leaned over and began to nudge her little brother.

“Wha?--wha, Sissy? I *aseepin*.”

“We’re gonna get out for awhile, Bobby. C’mon, you need to stretch your legs a little bit.”

Julia got out, moved the seat up, and started to help him out, gingerly. It was difficult going because of the braces, but finally she got him out of the car and had him standing, shakily outside. Cinder crawled out after him, eager for a cigarette. It had been hours since they had eaten, and who knew how much longer it might be before they could get settled in, and maybe get some food somewhere.

“ It’s at least a beautiful night.”

Julia and Cinder both lit their cigarettes, and leaned against the car, blowing clouds of scent around them, smoke twirling away in the gentle breeze.

Cinder ambled over to the tall fence that bounded the bedraggled field which they had parked next to. She realized, for the first time, just how alone they were out here. And not a sign of anyone for miles. It was like they had wandered into an episode of the Twilight Zone. But, at least the stars, and the cicada chirp, somehow made the night more bearable. More beautiful, in a strange way. She was attracted to a beauty, at times, which she knew the average person could not appreciate.

“Well, this is certainly a change from our typical routine, huh Cin?”

“Yeah, ” said Cinder, not really knowing what to say, and not having much of anything to say to Julia, at all.

But at least she’s being more friendly now. The least I can do is try to reciprocate. Make this all more pleasant.

“Yeah, the stars really are beautiful tonight. I can’t see the moon though.”

“That’s cause there isn’t any. The light from the stars, by the way, took a million plus years to make it here. Those stars may not even be there now.”

I think I know that. Bitch.

Julia dragged deeply on her cigarette, turned, looked across the road, at the rolling field, rotting barn, and dilapidated, boarded-up house nestled farther down in a stand of trees.

“Spooky out here. I hope your father hurries up. Oh, I don’t know what the hell he was thinking when he started out this morning without knowing--exactly--where it was he was going!”

“Julia?”

Pause.

“What?”

“We’re going to look back on all this in a few days and laugh our asses off.”

She suddenly sounded consoling.

“Oh yes dear, of course. This sort of thing happens all the time. Your father will find someone to help us. Hell, no one can go wandering around old houses at night without getting stopped, frisked, fingerprinted, interrogated, and fined by the local pork. It’s just a waiting game now.”

Cinder started to laugh. It was Julia’s saving grace: her sometimes flashes of sardonic wit. Smoke drifted like phantom fingers in the quiet, country breeze.

In truth, Julia did not feel like being funny at all.

Everything had been, somehow, wrong, the further into this miserable ass-backwards state they had driven. Missing road-signs, bad directions, lack of anything even

remotely like hospitality in the manner of the bitter, impoverished locals. And now they were caught here in this strange Devil's Triangle of rural Kentucky, a place that seemed as lonesome and forlorn as a wasteland, with miles of empty country road, rolling hills, deep briars, and desolate, empty houses rotting in the wind.

Jesus, this was not how she remembered this state. Not at all.

She suddenly felt disoriented and afraid. Just where in the hell were they? Her eyes scanned the horizon for signs of light and life, but the deep, moonless night seemed to forbid the penetration of eyesight. Up ahead, around the bend, Bill would probably still be walking. Alone. With his arms swinging, and his big, courageous heart keeping him steady. But the night often held secrets, she knew.

She feared for him. She looked down at her watch. 12:15. He had been gone for about forty-five minutes now. *Well, give it a little more time before you start getting too panicky.*

They each smoked a few cigarettes between them. Bobby ambled, precariously, over the rough clumps of grass. He looked like he had made a boo-boo.

"Shit, I need to change him, Cin. Want to help?"

There had been one bathroom break since they had driven away from the gas station, and it had been an undignified roadside stop with the three adults taking turns in the bushes. Thankfully, Julia always carried a box of tissue paper with her, and they had managed to wipe up as best they could. Fortunate for them, there had been no lunch or dinner to make their bowels any fuller than

breakfast had.

Cinder suddenly realized she was thirsty and starving. She had finished a Coke and some candy bars a few hours earlier, and her stomach was starting to grumble hard. Maybe losing her appetite was what she needed.

“Yeah. Sure. I thought he started to smell a little ripe.”

Julia reached into the car and pulled out her blue and pink diaper bag. She used disposables in place of the plastic Depends for when she was on the road, in just such an emergency. She also carried a fair amount of bottled water, Cinder suddenly realized, and before she could say anything, Julia handed her the large plastic thermos and said, “Here. Take some. We’ll need the rest of it to clean him up, but we can’t afford to dehydrate either. I wish we had made your father take a few gulps before he left.”

It’s been almost an hour. Where the hell is he? Why isn’t he back yet?

She sighed again, realized this wasn’t going to be easy. She didn’t want to put him in the grass, so instead she led Bobby to the hood of the car, helped him on top, and told him to lay back. Cinder helped her take his pants off.

The diaper smelled disgusting. And it was disgusting, and Cinder was surprised she hadn’t noticed the smell of the shit while confined in the car. But Julia kept Bobby so clean, so tidy--maybe it was the baby powder or odor-absorbent diapers that did the trick. Whatever it was, she felt her stomach churn mercilessly at the reeking funk of the shitty diaper, and Julia made damn sure to toss it, holding it in the tips of her fingers, her face curling into a little sour mask, far into the field beyond.

Cinder looked at her sprawled, naked, filthy brother; she had never realized before how small, how shrunken his genitals were. He was almost thirteen, and he had always been small, unhealthy, even before the accident. But he was hung like a baby, and the curled, limp, white ugliness of his cock mad her gag again. She also realized, with a submerged sense of pity, that, in all his life, it was certain that no one, no man or woman, would probably ever want to hold her brother, and love him, and that, fundamentally, it made no difference if his member was tiny or not.

Julia acted with practiced speed, cleaned him, powdered him, and put another diaper on his skinny little butt. Cinder then helped her get him back into his pants, being careful not to show Julia how nauseated she now felt, and they helped Bobby stand back up, and get some dignity back.

“Sissy I do good. I do good? Sissy? I do good?”

“Yeah, Bobby. Sure. You did just fine.”

“You’re okay now honey. Daddy will be back in just a little bit, and we’ll all go to a diner and get something to eat and go to bed. You’d like that wouldn’t you?”

Bobby yawned and rubbed his eyes. Suddenly, as if struck by a bolt of lightening, Julia popped up and said, “Oh shit. I forgot all about that. Wait.”

She walked around to the driver’s side door, leaned in, and popped open the trunk. Cinder watched as she went in back, pawed through some of Bobby’s luggage, and came out with a plastic sack full of wrapped goodies.

“I forgot I packed some of his favorite things to take with him for snacks. Peanut butter and jelly, apples,

beans and wieners, chocolate grahams...Carrot and celery sticks. Anybody hungry?"

For one surreal moment, Cinder thought she could actually learn to love Julia. A little, at least.

They sat in the car, glumly munching, but for the moment thankful that they had just a little food to share. They ate greedily, half-starved, not used to going without hot dinners. Cinder ate some beans and wieners, a half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and drank a juice drink in a plastic envelope that helped real good but she feared would make her even thirstier. Bobby ate the most, and Julia the least. But Julia was very thin, often ate like a bird, and could sustain herself on a thimbleful of protein a day. Cinder felt some of her energy return. Suddenly, her mind fixed on the amount of time Daddy had been gone.

Bobby ate, or rather, was fed, from the fingers of Julia and Cinder, and then, almost immediately afterward, drifted back to a kind of resigned slumber. Julia was at least thankful for this. Outside, the night seemed to close in again, even more cold and unfriendly than before. It had been made a tad cheerier by the food, but the food was gone now; only the anxiety began to return like a creeping serpent that had been repulsed and held at bay for a few minutes.

"Where is he? Julia, what time is it?"

She looked down at her watch. Opened her eyes tiredly, exhaustedly. She frowned.

"Nearly One thirty. It's been well over an hour. But, he may have found someone. Maybe making arrangements. Your father is a very resourceful man, Cin."

"I know. I just can't help--do you think we should go look for him? I mean, together?"

Julia's head popped around, and she said, a little too impatiently, "What about Bobby? Who is going to look after him while you and I go tramping around in the dark? What if he wakes up?"

Cinder was caught between a rock and a place she didn't want to be--on one hand, she couldn't just sit here all night, waiting on pins and needles, wondering if Daddy was alright. On the other hand, the idea of her baby brother waking up, alone, in a locked car--screaming in terror and confusion, pissing himself in fear, made her want to cry. Either way, she knew she wouldn't be able to relax until she saw her father walking back up the road in the moonlight, or--even better-- being driven by someone with a little common decency. A rescuer.

She leaned back, huffed a miserable sigh, suddenly hated the confining car, so lost and useless out here in the middle of nowhere, in a strange country setting that, seemingly, was as desolate as the icy cavity beneath her ribcage felt right now.

"Julia?"

"What, Cin?"

"Promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise that, once we get home, the next time Daddy wants to drive us all to Kentucky, or wherever, for whatever reason, on a long trip, just do me one favor."

"What?"

"Kick him in the balls."

Julia burst out laughing, and Cinder joined her a little,

despite everything. Suddenly, Julia did something that surprised Cinder very much. She reached into her purse, after seemingly winning a struggle with herself, and pulled out a little plastic baggie hidden in a secret compartment. For a moment, Cinder was so shocked she completely forgot everything else except what Julia was rolling between her skinny, painted, manicured fingernails.

Cinder sniggered, "Shit! You do come prepared."

Julia looked back at her with a sort of half-embarrassed grin, and said, "Your Dad doesn't like it. But, he knows--sometimes--it's the only thing that calms me down. I know you smoke too. Or at least, your father *knows* you smoke, and I suspect that you do. Want some?"

"Oh God, Julia, thank you. You are, like, so cool."

"Well," she said, putting one final, expert twist on the joint (Julia always did everything with a deftness and neatness that was inspiring), and said, "I know we haven't, always, gotten along, Cin. I'd like to change that, if we could. I mean, I know I'll never be a replacement for your mother..."

Cinder suddenly felt a small sense of guilt well up in here, and an uncharacteristic warmth of familiarity with Julia that made the situation just a little bit better.

"Oh stop it, Jules...I'm a brat. I've always been a brat. I can't help it. It's just that after the accident and the funeral, I just never stopped...you know..."

Julia shook her head, and her face went a little slack.

"Your mother was a friend of mine...and a good one. Here."

She lit the joint, inhaled deeply, and held the smoke in

for a moment, and passed the joint along to Cinder. The girl took it carefully, still looking at the beautiful, strange wife her father had chosen, and took a toke. A too powerful one. My, wasn't Daddy going to be surprised when he got back and found his girls as stoned as a couple of dirty hippies?

Cinder coughed a few times, and handed (*passed*, she reminded herself. *You don't "hand" a joint around. You pass it around. God, I'm still so square!*) the reefer back to Julia, who took another hit, rolled the window back down, felt for the flare gun under the seat, took a second drag, and handed Cinder the joint again. She took another hit, coughed a little more, said, "Damn! That's good shit."

"It's *creeper*. It'll creep up on ya. Watch out!"

"I hate this fucking state, Julia."

"I know. So do I. Everybody comes from the shallow end of a gene pool that doesn't fork. If you take my meaning."

"Hey, incest is the best."

She giggled. The world started looking a little brighter, and she had some visuals explode in her mind's eye that were, altogether wonderful.

She saw the ruins of Aztec temples, the sides of verdant old hills that became lunar mountains as her consciousness spread all over them. She saw naked people dancing, wildly, her mind tripping out over a sudden explosion of visuals, while she closed her eyes and let her consciousness drift. She suddenly felt like she was floating suspended in the aether, letting rays of light penetrate her skin.

She was a beautiful, Madonna-like creature in his

moment; floating in some undefined space beyond hope of being reclaimed by the pain, by the drudgery of modern existence. She was covered in glittering diamonds; she was Queen of the Heavenly Spheres; she was a radiant angel that was to be adored.

But the image could not last. Had already began to evolve, and it was the one fact about drugs--at least about marijuana--that she didn't like or understand: the inability to control the mind when it was at it's most malleable and vulnerable to suggestion.

Suddenly, the images began to tilt and shift, and recombine until the wondrous mystical aspect of the imagery began to take on a darker, more debased quality.

It was the reek of shit; it was shit-consciousness that assaulted her. It was a creeping terror, a sense of her own inadequacy, of the comic figure of herself as she went about her life, confined behind a façade of ego defense mechanisms that permitted her to exist, and, rarely, thrive. But it was stripped away, and she fancied she could smell pictures, and taste thoughts.

Beautiful vistas and foggy fantasies were corrupted in the derangement of her paranoia, until all of life seemed to be summed up in the stinking image of shitty diapers, lonely, alien landscapes, and confinement in a place that seemed to be choking her senseless.

"Julia...I think that the world is made of shit. I think that we all come from shit, and stay in shit, and, when we die, we go back to shit again. But, in between, we try to convince ourselves that we are real."

"You're stoned...honey, you're getting paranoid. Calm down. Relax. Try to sleep if you can. I'll be awake until he

comes back.”

She looked at Julia’s face, the bony contours of which seemed to explode outward into a macabre, tight, ugly-comic mask.

She leaned over in her seat and began to nod off, Julia sucking the end of the roach in trembling fingers.

Chapter 4

Bill started to walk with the gripping feeling that tonight was not going to end on a high note.

His feet clomped against the dusty road, his dogs already tired. He was sure he wouldn’t sleep at all tonight. Would, in fact, spend the entire evening kicking himself about his fuck up. Oh well, he supposed that no one was ever perfect.

He looked back, occasionally, watching the headlights turn into distant pools behind him. Ahead, the road disappeared for a mile into darkness, into creaking woods, into a world that felt as coldly alien as anything he had ever known. And the mosquitoes were fearsome, tonight.

A light breeze ruffled his hair. He could not believe the way the day had derailed. He began to think, to himself perhaps, that this was, somehow, the punishment of God. Was he truly, deeply, responsible for a plot to abandon his son? Had his son become that much of an unconscious burden?

Perhaps this was God’s way of dealing with him. He put his hands in his pockets and began to whistle.

“It’ll be okay,” he told himself, “Everything will be

okay. And when we get home, I am going to sleep for about forty-eight hours. Then, I am going to get up, and take the entire family out for ice cream. And I am never going to let my son out of my sight, again. Specialist facility, or not, we are the ones best qualified to raise him. I can see that now.”

Clip-clop-clip-clop--he was keeping his mind on the rhythm of his feet, trying to drown out the creeping uneasiness he felt the farther he got from the car headlights--from his family, from, at least, some semblance of security and warmth. But he was the man of the house, and that meant, well, the least pleasant duties always fell to him.

He wondered how far he would have to walk. Maybe a mile or two, he figured, but event he back roads of Kentucky had to end at some point. Eventually, the country lane would feed back into the country shire, the small city, civilization. Along the way, someone would surely be sitting in a beat up old rocker, in a house between two hills, drinking coffee and smoking a pipe far into the night. Someone that was friendly. Someone with a phone.

He looked back over his shoulder. The headlights looked like two pin-points in the distance now, and he felt a little pang of sorrow to realize that he had to walk these miles alone. He could have used a friendly voice with him, Julia or Cinder. Both. But Bobby had to come first, and Bobby couldn't walk all this way, and so someone had to stay behind and watch Bobby and he was damn sure not going to let just one of his girls stay with the kid, alone. There was safety in numbers. Everybody

knew that.

“Goddamn! I sure wish I hadn’t listened to that fucking gas station clerk!”

He spat, angrily. The filthy sleazebag had given him the wrong directions on purpose; had, in fact, got his whole family stranded out in the middle of nowhere. And the gas was no good; it had played hell with the engine as soon as they got back out on the road. He was going to have to learn to be careful when it came to dealing with sleazy guys like that. He was too trusting.

“I’m going to have to learn, one of these days, that not everyone is as good-hearted as I am. Mom always told me that. Julia tells me that. I am a pushover. I am a pussy.”

There was one time, however, when he had managed to put his foot down, in a way which even he had been somewhat ashamed of later.

It had concerned Cinder and a boy named Jake, with whom she had become infatuated a couple of years back. Jake was a lanky, black-haired dirt bag with a leather jacket, a swagger, and eyes that were perpetual, stoned pinpoints. What’s more, Bill had learned that Jake, quite possibly, was already the father of a little bastard child that he wasn’t paying support for.

Jake pushed a little reefer on the side.

Jake was nineteen and had never worked a day in his life.

He thought his daughter was seeing him more for shock value than anything else, but it was the one time that Bill, who normally let the kid get away with murder, stepped in and *forbade* his daughter to have anything to do with the loser.

That had been a big fight. Maybe the biggest, and she had stormed her little ass out the door and down the street, and called and said she was spending the night with her friend Debra. He had sensed this was a lie, had gone over to Debra's and made sure. Then, he loaded in his car, and went cruising the streets.

Sure enough, he had found them together at a local lover's lane, had parked for a moment, unsure of what to do, then, in a heated burst, he had jumped out of his car, walked up to the little red corvette that Jake had, most probably, acquired through the good graces of his rich father, and had pulled the driver's side door open.

With one trembling hand he had pulled the punk out of the car, his daughter screaming in the passenger seat, and started to toss the skinny dirt bag (he was half-amused at how easy this actually was) against the hood of the car like a rag doll.

"Hey Man! Shit man! Take it easy! I wasn't doing nothing to her, man!"

"Daddy! Daddy! Stop it!"

Cinder was balling, hard, and for a moment, Bill had the white hot urge to just take the kid's neck in both hands and strangle the breath out of him. It would have been easy, at this point. For the first time, he realized, clearly, how simple it was for one person to go too far; to kill another human being. It was easy--just a few more pounds per square inch of pressure and Romeo would be pushing up daisies in hell. He grinned, in spite of himself.

He pushed the kid to the pavement, where he lay, half-poised to bound up and run like hell, with a look of total and complete shock on his face.

"It's cool man! It's cool! Just take it easy, big man!"

Bill looked down at him, spat, and said, "No, jerk off, it isn't cool."

He looked at his daughter. He knew she was going to hate him for this for months to come, and she would be as embarrassed as hell when she went back to school, and had to face her friends. She wouldn't be cool in their eyes, because her daddy had intervened with her chance to score with, like, the hottest guy in town.

"And as for you: you're coming home, right now, young lady. Now!"

And for once, she knew that Daddy was not kidding, not joking, not trying to be "tolerant" and "understanding" and "liberal". Now he was being a Real Daddy. Now he was being a *hero*.

She climbed into the car, still crying, and he knew she was probably hating him more right now than at any moment in their entire sixteen year relationship. Before he got in the car himself, he turned to Jake, who was still lying on the grand, gasping in fear, and held out one accusatory finger.

"As for you: you stay away from my daughter, you rotten little thug. Understand? Don't forget this. Just stay away from my daughter. Got that?"

He nodded.

"I didn't hear you."

Bill leaned over with his fist, his mighty big fist, drawn back in striking posture. Jake looked, for a moment, like he was going to piss his breeches.

"Yeah man, yeah! I understand! You'll never see me again, I swear!"

Bill suddenly felt his anger recoil a little. He took a deep breath, straightened himself out, and said, " Okay. Great. Sorry about our little misunderstanding. Get yourself together, son. You got no business wasting your life like you are."

Then, realizing he was only the parent of one child present, he quickly turned, got in his car, and drove them both home.

Cinder sat there in silence, choking back sobs that were becoming less and less frequent.

"D-Daddy--how could you? Oh, how could you?"

He was silent himself for a moment, guiding the car along empty, rain-slicked roads and doing his best to calm the sudden anxiety concerning his complete loss of temper. What if the kid had had a gun or something? The thought had never, not once, crossed his mind.

"What are you worried about Cin? That your friends will hate you? Make fun of you? If that's the case...well, you have some pretty fucked-up friends."

The last of the tears seemed to dry up quickly, except for an occasional, sniveling hiccup.

"We weren't doing anything, Daddy..."

"I hope not...At any rate, when the time comes you'll find the right guy. Not some two-bit druggie creep like that. Somebody good for you, Punkin. Somebody that really cares. I thought you knew that."

She turned in her seat, and he could tell, with one white-hot flood of love, that, finally, he was starting to get through to her. Show her how much, indeed, he really did care.

"Oh *Daddy*..."

She started to tear up again, and he put one consoling arm out and drew her close to him.

For that moment, in her eyes, he knew he had instantaneously been transformed into a hero. Her hero.

And knowing that made all the difference to him in the world.

He had slept very well that evening.

The road had begun to curve around, cutting into a sort of shallow, dark ravine, and trees lined both sides, their branches forming a canopy thick enough to obscure the stars, which were brighter, and more frightening than he had ever seen them shine in his life. He put his hands in his pockets, leaned against the gentle breeze, kicking pebbles and loose gravel out in front of him as he walked.

He didn't like the look of the road up ahead. It stretched into an unfathomable murk of blackness, with occasional pools of glistening moonlight shining against the badly-cracked asphalt beneath his feet. Still there was no sign of life. But, surely, eventually, he would be able to find a state trooper, or a country sheriff, or even a helpful, lonely old woman, sitting up in her parlor, looking out at the darkness through the veil of her lonely memories.

She probably wouldn't answer the door for me anyway.

A more frightening thought would be if he was mistaken for a burglar, or something. Knock on somebody's door way out here at past-two in the morning, and you could be picking buckshot out of your brand new asshole.

No, better to just try and get to the next pissant country burg, and find an all-night diner, or flag down a patrol

car. Whatever the case, he realized wearily, he still had a hell of a lot of lonesome walking left to him.

He tried to keep his mind--which kept darting back and forth between memories, dreams, and the lurking anxieties of a man walking a country road, alone, in the middle of the night--on bright and happy subjects. He found that that didn't come easy.

The unearthliness of it all hit him in one fell swoop. He realized that, for some reason, he had been cast out here to walk this lonely stretch of road to whatever end he might find tonight. His tired mind was struggling to assimilate the odd set of circumstances that had led, inevitably, to him traversing this desolate countryside in the middle of the night.

"Everything happens for a reason, I suppose."

He realized he was talking to himself. He could hear animals rustling in the bushes, and every creaking branch and blowing leaf was, suddenly, helping to build his own sense of apprehension. But he did what he could to forestall a panic attack. After all, he was a hero, wasn't he?

He was Dad.

It must have been over an hour later when he realized that he had, finally, stumbled upon Pleasant Point.

It had taken him a trek up a very steep hill, another long sojourn through a wooded lane, and down a long, gravel strip between two weed-choked fields, but, suddenly, as if in the midst of some meandering dream, he realized that series of ramshackle, forlorn little huts had begun to crop up in the midst of his path, leaning precariously at angles which suggested they were in

danger of falling over through the weight of their own rotten structures. He began to move slowly over a road that was little more than straggles of deteriorated brick, and his eyes took in the strange little series of dwellings that looked as if they had never--not now, not eighty years ago--ever been fit for human habitation.

It did, in fact, look as if Pleasant Point was nothing more than the ironic sobriquet for an oversized farmyard; albeit, a farmyard that had been left to the ravages of time and sentenced, thereby, to lie in its own accumulated filth.

“Jesus! *The stench...*”

Their was a crawling, putrid, alive smell about the place--it was the stench of an outhouse, the musty odor of rot and shit and animal vitality that some men called the “smell of nature”. But it was overpoweringly consolidated in this straight straggle of forlorn abodes.

He began to walk slowly through what, he supposed would be town square. Got out his flashlight, flicked on the beam, and began to scan the darkness in temporary, curious confusion.

There were no street signs. No signs of any kind. No signs of life, either, At least, not of two-legged life.

The houses--shacks, he corrected himself--were rotten, box-like structures that were much too small to accommodate more than an individual living in them. This place, whatever it was, had never been a town of average people.

Instead, everywhere he turned, and the entire town was divided into four small quarters by an intersecting brick and dirt roads, the suggestions was of some sort of

communal asylum--perhaps for monkeys, he thought with the wisp of a grin.

Doorways were covered by chicken-wire, strange splashes of paint, mud, and other substances covered walls in bizarre, quasi-meaningful snatches of script and gibberish. He walked over to the gutters of the road, stepped across, and examined a weird, sprawling script that covered the dusty sides of one small dwelling.

It looked like cryptic writing, scrawled by a demented child in what was, possibly, a fetid ink made of shit, piss, and blood. He moved the beam of the flashlight over it, trying to piece together what it read.

"We come...take...night...back...eat..."

There were unintelligible words hidden between, words he couldn't piece what no matter what. And this sort of scrawl littered everything randomly, moving up and down walls and across stone porches, and was carved, he could now see, even in the sides of trees.

"Who in the hell lived in this place? What in the hell happened here?"

He climbed from the little alleyway/cul-de-sac he had wandered into, and went into the center of the dirt track. For a moment, buried beneath the clack-clack sound of old tin-points and some assorted--what looked to be--chicken bones strung up like decrepit Christmas ornaments--again randomly--on trees and over entrances, he thought he could hear a brief, faint rustling. An occasional indication that something, perhaps some mange-ridden animal fresh out of food, was lurking in the darkness, out of the range of his vision.

He'll be smelling me out...if it is a dog.

This last thought did not seem to him to be very comforting, at all.

Cinder sat upon the grass, looking out at a world she barely understood. Inside, although she could not see her, she knew that Mommy was getting dinner ready, cooking and fussing and not worrying, for one moment, about how today was going to end. Mommy would be pretty sure that today would end just like every other day had for years: Bill would come home from work, put his briefcase down on the table, and give her the first kiss of the evening. She would stop for a moment whatever she was doing, would wipe sweat from her pretty brow for a moment, would look up at him with a little sigh. She would thank her lucky stars that she had been good enough for him, not knowing that, all the while, he thanked his own false gods about the phantom luck they had, seemingly, bestowed on him. He would ask her how her day had been--had the kids been good? Had they both been adorable little angels, so overwhelmingly wonderful, so saccharine sweet that the very image of them seemed to have been drawn from the images of some third-rate television sitcom, with a perpetually smiling family living out the humdrum half-hour segments of their existence in some blissful never land, where the biggest problem confronting any of them at one time was what wacky hijinx little Dennis/Dobie/Ralphie had managed to politely bungle his misunderstanding way into?

Ah, that was life on the television, as she had understood it then. She looked up in the sky, at pretty white clouds that seemed to drift forever in a fathomless, timeless blue that was all the more horrible because it was neverending.

She would have a day, still some several years in the future, when she would meditate (albeit, in a drunken, drugged state)

about the horror of a never-ending cosmic sky, a feeling of vast alienation that was so overwhelmingly crushing that it threatened the marrow of her bones and the breath in her lungs. At that time she thought about the perpetual rise and fall of the ever-dying world of nature. "Ashes to ashes", she had croaked, while envisioning a world of rotting things, of tombs stuffed with uneasy, sepulchral remains. Of the dying and rising and dying again cycle of all of existence. And, for a moment, she forgot to breathe.

But that was far in the future, in another place, and this was childhood. She sat by herself on the lawn, holding her toys over a little mound of earth she had made with cupped, dirty hands, Styrofoam cups, and a plastic toy shovel.

They were non-descript action figures, molded from the pale characterizations of some utterly unimpressive science fiction cinema epic, but to her they represented a totemic power of goodness that could be captured, like a spirit, in a few plastic details. They were voodoo dolls of heroic archetypes. But she never realized that. She snarled her nose.

Mommy had said, "Those are boys toys, honey. Don't you want some nice dollies?" But she had refused, and she had gotten what she wanted. Space commanders with phony muscles; killer robots three inches tall.

She made up dialogue for them, images flashing in her mind, images of Bobby playing and splashing in mud puddles, his feet born to the innocent, unambiguous joys of childhood at a time when he seemed never to be able to be separated from it. Images of Mommy hugging Daddy, Daddy Hugging Mommy, Mommy hugging Cinder, Cinder Hugging Bobby...

"Hello these are my family photos. We are such a happy fam-i-lee." She stood in front of the classroom for a moment, too lost in rapturous adulation of her own more-than-perfect home, her

Hero Mommy and Her hero Daddy, her living action-figures, to be aware that, as we grow, time ,makes fools of us all.

Gawking faces. Children leaning over desks, clapping, Teacher smiling blandly. The Fair. The Carnival. Rides. Games. Amusements. The twirl of the Tilt-a-Whirl; the sinister smile of a clown.

“Want some candy, little girl?”

Images flooded her consciousness. How could one describe, even in the throes of madness, the living death that amounts to growing old? She had sat, pen in hand, for years, trying to do this very thing: to put into writing all her most sacred thoughts, feeling , emotions and memories, but all that ever came was the same torrent of non-sequential writing that always frustrated her hopes of ever achieving anything of any creative merit. She had ideas, even snatches of the words, but she lacked something. Perhaps, form...

She moved across the hardened earth. She knew, suddenly, that something awful was about to happen. She had the same feeling, the same lost, sick feeling of dread she had experienced before, in this very spot, and for a time, she was on the cusp of becoming cognizant of something she was trying, desperately to remember. She put down her toys, stood up, and started to walk back up the lawn, toward the front door.

She pulled the screen door open, looked inside, but the kitchen was dark, quiet; seemingly deserted.

“Mommy? Daddy? Where are you?”

She walked inside. She felt a growing well of tension and sadness penetrate the thin wall of her chest, consume her greedily. She tiptoed through the rest of the house.

It had began to look old, more ruined with every step. The soft, relaxing, fine furniture that her mother had bought had been cleared out, and for a moment Cinder thought, perhaps,

they had been robbed. She didn't completely, understand what that phrase meant exactly--not yet--but she had heard it on an old cop show re-run, and she understood it had something to do with losing all of your furniture. Well, not all.

There was a broken, battered chair or two turned over. The wall paper was peeling; cobwebs were strung over the staircase; gloom carpeted everything with slants of creeping, bright sunlight and moats of twirling dust.

She began to climb the stairs. The carpeting was filthy. She went up to her room, her own room...It was as empty as all the others. More so, because the sudden absence of beloved objects shocked her with a new grief, a new sense of loss and vulnerability. She knew all the rooms would be bare.

They've gone off and left me! Her mind screamed, but she half-refused to believe it. She didn't bother at looking in any of the other rooms; she knew they would all be equally lonesome, and decrepit.

She began to cry, hard, and suddenly a squeal of tires left her running down the stairs, her heart thumping, a sob caught in the tight space in her throat. She knew suddenly, that as soon as she got down the stairs there would be something horrible waiting for her. Something dreadful. Something too horrible to deal with. So bad, in fact, that she would repress the memory of it in the back of her consciousness for as long as she would live, and retrieve it only at those odd and sundry moments when the world of dreams and nightmares permitted no censorship, no isolation of any memory or image, no matter how damaging.

Her feet seemed to be encased in wet cement, every step was slower, more, ponderous; the effort involved with simply making it back out the front door seemed overwhelming. She fought it desperately; the world had suddenly been wound-down into a stupefying, torturous slow-motion.

“Cinder!”

(Cinder was running through a labyrinth, pursued by invisible phantoms, filthy arms clutching at her everywhere, around every corner, as she skittered on the dirt floor like a terrified rabbit pursued by a wolf.)

“Cinder!”

She sprang awake, looked at the freeze-frame of Julia, who had been startled by the steady rocking of the car. The silhouettes that surrounded it. The people that were trying to turn the car over.

Cinder rubbed her eyes blearily, said, “Is Daddy? What’s ah, ohmigod...”

She looked around. Surrounding the car were several scrawny, ugly figures, protected by the darkness, sheathed in the night. And they were rocking the car back and forth, laughing, groaning, yelling curses and threats, hammering on the hood and the glass.

The back car window exploded outward into a million tiny, glistening fragments.

Hands--rugged, hard, filthy, brutish hands that grew from the end of powerful arms--thrust themselves through the back window, and gripped her with a ferocity with which she had never been handled before. She screamed, fought, pounded her fists in futility. But it was like trying to wage war against an army of iron men. She was dragged out, kicking and screaming, a dirt-encrusted hand covering her lips.

Julia had had no opportunity to even fire the flare gun; it had been taken away from her in a split second by more

thrusting hands, reaching in to claim her in exactly the same way as they had claimed her stepdaughter. Bobby had bolted awake instantly, was screaming blue murder, and suddenly he was dragged out too. It was as if they had been set upon by an army of animalistic monsters from the blue depths of some psychotic fiction.

Suddenly, a dirty cloth bag was thrust over her head, and tightened with a leather cord at the throat. She began to strangle, the cord digging into her white flesh, and she could feel her bowels give way as stars exploded behind her eyelids.

"Pig...that will teach you to scream."

Chapter 5

The next hours of her life were a blur of pain, fear, madness, and exhaustion.

It was as if hell had descended upon them; a hell of monsters born from the pit of some nightmare; She remembered coming to with her hair a mass of blood, laying upon the filthy floor of some dark, noxious place.

Her first hours were spent fighting her way back to consciousness, groping, blindly, in the dark for some explanation. Was she dead? Was this what Hell was like? She didn't know. She felt pain consume her consciousness.

Voices. Echoes. Shadows. A light. A trickling light that only dimly illuminated what she could see around her. Cinder, her head feeling as if it had been crushed between two great weights, sat groggily up in the darkness, feeling the squish of wet earth beneath her palms.

Her eyes darted around in the gloom. Where was she? What had happened? Where had they taken her? She tried to stand up on trembling legs, fell backward from exhaustion. It was too much.

Suddenly, just above her, a light seemed to come streaming down between the slats of a wooden trap. She looked up, put her arm up quickly, and tried to lift.

The trap rattled in its frame, and she could hear a chain that, obviously, held it shut. She tried again. More rattling. But the trap wouldn't lift.

Suddenly, above her, she could hear the heavy tread of footfalls scrape across a floor.

The Bone Man entered the room, dragging behind him a heavy burlap bag littered with spare parts, bits of skeleton, and other such detritus as he had managed to find rummaging through graveyards and countryside scrap heaps.

He set down his burden, sighed, heard the trap rattle, sighed, and went over to it, bending down and unfastening the hitch of the chain.

"Pretty piggy..." he drawled, and bent over into the hole, thrusting his arm into the darkness.

Cinder lunged forward to avoid his grasp, but failed to move quickly enough. A gnarled hand as strong as steel caught her by her hair, pulling her back fiercely, and hauling her upward with one arm, kicking and screaming.

It slid her across the uneven floorboards, and pulled her up until its face was directly in front of her.

Cinder screamed. The face she beheld was more of a skull than anything else; a gross, leprous portrait of

malignant rot, peeling skin, and tumescent hideousness. It was perched atop a rail-thin body covered in filthy bib overalls and a flannel shirt.

“You shut *yo’* mouth! You *heah?*” The rotten mouth spat forth a wad of phlegm into the center of her face. The voice sounded like it was being gurgled through water. Cinder continued to fight, curse, and scream. Soon, they were joined by others.

It was a motley crew from the mouth of hell; a ragged, rotting collection of deformed, twisted, jabbering half-humans that seemed to have been birthed from the fetid womb of pain. Filth and darkness followed them around as they circled her, speaking in strange mutterings, dirty lips leering over rotting gums.

Her next moments were a blur of pain, terror, and exhaustion. She was dragged, kicking and screaming like an animal, through the filthy, reeking farmhouse, and violated in ways her mind would never recover from. She fought madly, desperately, letting the animal burst forth from her rational being; loosing the beast, and crawling, with all her consciousness, back into a pit in her mind.

They had stripped her half-naked, and began to stuff bones, sticks, and fingers in her bodily orifices. She wrestled away from them, again and again, escaping the clawing clutches, only to be pulled backward through the dirt and grime and filth on the floor. She was no longer Cinder anymore; no longer Daddy’s Little Girl. Now, she was one undeniable, frenzied nerve ending of pain and terror and viciousness.

Her captors themselves were various shades of sub-human wretchedness; tattered clothing hung from their

filthy limbs like soiled rags. Their heads and faces were masses of peeling skin, strange cysts, bumps, scars, tumors, and rotted teeth. Their hair was thin and wispy strands that must have been falling out in clumps.

It was as if the denizens of some nightmare institution for the mentally degenerate had been loosed upon her, to rape and kill at will. She swung out blindly with her gripping fingers, pulling back tufts of hair and cloth, but it only drove them wilder with decadent, drooling fervor.

The Leader, or, rather, the most relatively “normal” among them (although that may strike the reader as being an absurd notion, altogether, given the debased state of the motley crew assembled), kicked her squarely in the ribs, and then lowered himself, with one powerful arm, on top of her.

Even through her terror, she was still sickened by the repulsive, rankness of his breath; his mouth smelled like cheap booze, rotten teeth, and mucus. He said, “ I got me an eyeful of you earlier today, *possum*. You sure are a *purty* little *thang*. *I’m a-going to give it to you like you ain’t never had it...*” His heart was thumping like a drum, and his miserable, monstrous family circled him, whooping and hollering, gabbling with excitement amongst themselves.

He dripped spittle into her mouth.

She could feel his powerful arm slide down the center of her chest, to his belt buckle. She moaned, gagged, and began to squirm ferociously as he fumbled to lower his jeans.

Suddenly, she lunged forward, with an animal’s fury, and sank her teeth into his shoulder with as much

savagery as she could muster.

Her mouth filled with blood, but it was enough.

“You--BITCH HOG! YOU FUCKING BITCH HOG!”

He drew back in pain, and she scampered from beneath him and ran blindly across the darkened floorboards. She raked her shins against a staircase, and in panic, raced on hands and feet up the creaking, rotten steps, her hands punctured and bleeding with splinters and wood, into the greater darkness of the upper floors.

The confusion had been momentary.

Charley grabbed his shoulder, doubled-over, cursing and gasping in pain.

“We gonna kill that possum!”

“We gonna skin *that-thar* bitch alive!”

“Keep on running, girl! Ain’t *gonna* do you a damn bit of good!”

“We *gonna* feed that bitch to Daryl Wehunt!”

Cinder crouched at the top of the stairs, insensible to pain, her breath like jagged knives in her lungs. She could hear their rough stomp on the floor below. She heard the first few footfalls gently, slowly, press themselves on the bottom stair.

She scurried in the dark through the filth, like one more rat in this house of madness. She crawled blindly across the walls, fumbling in the dark, testing rattling doorknobs.

“ *Here pig-piggy-pig-pig-pig! C’mon back to Uncle Charley.*”

Charley cooed from the darkness below, but she knew he was being cautious. She crouched and crawled the

length of the hallway, her eyesight adjusting sufficiently to find a bedroom door that was partway ajar. A milk-white, diffuse illumination seemed to be emanating from within. Too quickly, she stood and opened the door, the hinges squeaking a rusty alarm, as the footfalls and laughter and mockery from below pounded their way up the staircase.

She ran into the room, slammed the door behind her.

Her eyes grew wide in shock.

The nightmare, it seemed, was not over yet.

There are primitive religions in the world, the practice of which, goes mostly unrecognized by the denizens of our modern technological society. There are primitive rites, the knowledge of which, is the sole province of men who make their livelihoods studying the bizarre aspects of tribal life that have evolved in places where modern man dares not step his foot.

Practitioners of Voodoo, Santeria, and even more obscure forms of black magic and Satanism are known to engage in shocking, blood-curdling rituals and pagan practices centered around death and pain. Even today, in the supposedly-sober and staid confines of our much-enlightened world, there are those who choose to test the limits of their own bodies, and their own minds, in furtherance of pushing open the edges of the envelope of reality.

However, nearly every example that this author can think of would pale in comparison to what Cinder beheld as she turned, seeking frantically in the darkness for something heavy enough to bar the door.

Fortunately for her, the rusted mechanism of the lock had snapped shut, barring the entrance of her captors from a room in their own hellish home.

She leaned, soaked in sweat, gasping for air, against the door, only to jump forward when the fists began pounding on the wood.

“Bitch! Bitch, open this damn door! You hear me? Don’t make us go round the other way to get at you! It’ll get us even more fired-up, girl!”

Her eyes lit upon the scene before suddenly, at last really looking at it.

It was a family scene out of Hell.

An old-fashioned davenport was flanked on either side by ornate wooden china cabinets. On the davenport sat a young couple, male and female, who must have been exhumed and placed in position after a rest of some few years. They were both dressed in the moldering rags in which they had been buried. Long tendrils of gray hair spilled out from beneath a straw bonnet that had been placed upon the woman’s head.

Cinder began to wretch. She held her mouth, coughing, choking back tears, momentarily oblivious to the hammerings and poundings on the door behind her.

Coiled between the two ghastly lovers, like some long, lovely pink ribbon, was what Cinder realized were strings of fresh intestines. Worms snuggled themselves in the hair, occasionally dropping into the dead laps with an audible, sickening rasp, to inch their way back to more satisfying enterprises. But that was not all.

On the table in front of them, floating in a yellowish-liquid she at first thought was piss, but realized must be

formaldehyde, was a human fetus; it's misshapen, squashed head no-doubt still bearing the imprint of the forceps that had been used to pull it from its sepulchral womb.

On the other side of the table, laid out in lewd display were two other corpses, also that of an apparent male and female. The male was nude from the waist downward, his pants collected at his rotting ankles, and the female was thrust wide in a kind of coital rigor mortis. Their faces were badly deteriorated, but the most comical aspect was the blond wig that had been thrust onto the corpse's head, and was kept crudely in place, apparently, by rusted nails that still protruded from the tangle of dead hair.

The entire room was lit by a hazardous collection of guttering candles, which cast bobbing shadow-shows of the horror against the barren walls, occasionally illuminating the faces of faded, ancient photographs

And everywhere were bones; littering the floor, covering the tables and chairs; whole skeletons sat up as if engaged in quiet conversations, their dead jaws hanging open in mockery of the eternal moment.

She turned, tasted the metallic taste of liquid vomit project up through her teeth, and she barfed copiously over the threadbare, filthy rug that must have, once, been ornate and beautiful. She had precious little but fluid and mucus in her stomach to void.

She collapsed upon her hands and knees, wretched miserably, her entire chest feeling as if it might pop from the wracking effort, when suddenly, through the blood pounding in her ears, she realized that all was quiet.

She looked up, her eyes darting like leaping flames in the darkness. Before her, at the far end of the room, a single boarded window looked blackly on into a night that might mean freedom at last from this seemingly wide-awake nightmare. She ran forward on trembling legs and began to pull at the boards, which had been hammered across haphazardly.

They squealed and rattled a bit, but they were impossible to pull from the wall. She used up the last bit of energy she had, and suddenly felt herself go dizzy and fall into the dust beneath her.

She crawled along the floor, listening at what had now become a terrifying silence. She didn't know why, but she placed her hand along the edge of peeling, discolored wallpaper, which was hanging in large, yellowed strips in places. She began to grope along it in blind panic, her mind racing in terror and a sense of absolute futility at her situation.

Suddenly, as she thrust forward her hand, she felt a perfect square trapdoor section of the wall move back. She stopped, unsure of what to do, and then pushed again.

The sound it made was minimal, but the hinges squealed enough to make her jump. It was like some sort of doggie-door. She thrust her hand inside, and then opened it wider to see.

Finally, knowing of no other recourse, she crawled into the hidden passage, a sort of narrow space between the walls that separated this room from a larger adjoining room. She crept into the darkness, straining to see between the crooked slats of boarding that made up the

partition to her right.

She slowed her breathing to a bare inaudible hiss. She looked into the trickling light that emanated from between the boarding, and was peering at a scene that even Hieronymous Bosch may have found himself hard-pressed to conceive.

Cinder had managed to pick up an odd, jagged piece of bone, with a sharp end. She clutched it tightly now as she looked in at the scene in the room beyond the partition.

It was an altar of madness; row after row of human skulls, set atop a great flat stone that arched upward into a sort of jagged peak, carved with a strange symbol the likes of which she had never before set eyes on. Rows of candles, some of them hidden inside the skulls, some of them left to burn as guttering stumps on top, continued the surreal interplay of light and shadow that lent an extra fillip of the terrible to the already demonic display.

Set upon the altar, opened as if it was a sacred family bible, was a tremendous, decrepit book. And in front of the book sat a withered, tiny crone, that looked as if it.

In an obscure corner of the room she saw a wire cage built around a heavy wooden frame; it was the sort of coop you might keep chickens, or possibly rabbits in. Inside, was the thin, shivering form of a human being. She thought that it might be Julia, but she could not be sure. It did seem, though, for some reason, that they had chopped the hair off in crude clumps, leaving only thin, straggling wisps to frame the scalp. The figure had wrenched its miserable fingers into the wire mesh of the cage, and was clinging pointlessly to it. The box was

padlocked shut.

A few shambling forms seemed to cling to the edges of the room, moving aimlessly; these did not seem to be like the others, the kidnappers from downstairs who had tried to rape her. These seemed--more deformed, or something. More frail; even disabled. But she couldn't tell very much by looking through the glowing slats of the partition.

What do I do? How do I escape? Where is my family? Where is daddy? Is he?--

She pushed such thoughts out of her mind. She had to carry forward with a single-minded purpose of survival. Then, when she could get out and get help, she would send the police back...That is what Daddy would have wanted her to do...

She continued to inch forward in the darkness, clutching the piece of bone, unable to take her eyes off the repulsive scene displayed through tiny slats between the crude boards of the partition.

She stopped for a second.

Her breath was a tight little in-and-out suck that seemed, to her, as loud as an escaping jet of steam, followed by the rapid filling of some bellows to blow the forges of hell. Yet she tried to control herself; tried to tell herself that the key was surviving the nightmare until she woke up.

A calf was led from the darkness of the room, its hooves clomping against the rough boards loudly. It was led forward by a little, hunchbacked freak, whose clothes seemed to be hanging from its emaciated body in filthy rags. She thought that maybe it was a child; it seemed to suffer from monstrous harelip, and the skin was filthy. It

was impossible to tell the sex.

She inched forward a few more paces, still keeping her vision trained at the shifting, peepshow view of events in the room beyond. She began to stumble, occasionally, over detritus; and she feared for a few moments, that this way might become blocked entirely, and she would be forced back into the room from which she had come.

Why haven't they come in after me yet? Is this some sort of sick game?

Suddenly, she kicked against something in the darkness, something that clanged; something that seemed to be filled with liquid. Her heart skipped a beat, and she felt sucked in her breath, too scared to even tremble.

Had they heard that? That had been loud. Why hadn't they heard that?

She then realized that something had begun in the next room that was distracting their attention. Several shambling, filthy forms had moved into a sort of circular position around the strange, huddled figure at the skull-strewn slab. Her eyes were, suddenly, riveted to the scene.

The figure had been scratching into the great book, she saw, and now had put down a quill feather, dipped in what she already knew was blood. It placed the quill back into the half-skull that had been modified to use as a sort of bloody ink well, and then shambled around.

Its garb was a filthy blanket that had been crudely stitched-together, and even, she saw, in some spots safety-pinned. It could not have been more than three feet tall, and the hands and feet were deformed in the same grotesque manner as the "Lobster Boy" she had once read

of in a magazine article: the hands and feet were non-existent, but the arms and legs ended, instead, in two fleshy, pointed tentacles, rendering normal walking and grasping a comedy. It lived and moved in a perpetual squat, and even more shocking, she saw now, quite clearly, that though it had been trusted to inscribe in the great book, it was quite impossible for it to see whatever it was it wrote, for its eyes and mouth had been crudely, horribly, stitched shut.

She bent for a moment on trembling legs, and examined the can. One sniff told her it was petrol. For some reason, perhaps just to get it out of the way, she picked it up, and kept holding it. A plan began to formulate itself around the edges of her mind.

There was other garbage and litter, some boxes, and more than enough darkness to make her stumble a time or two again, but still she kept her slow progress forward.

A slow rumbling chant had begun; the shambling shapes had begun to mouth strange phrases. The little lobster-man had waddled like a penguin across the floor, and out of the way.

She squinted. The cow, she now could see, was a sick and pitiful specimen, with streamers of mucous issuing from its snout, and a great, tumorous-looking body that seemed to, nearly, weigh it down. She thought it a miracle that the poor beast was standing. They pulled it closer to the unholy slab, the altar, and slowly began to circle around it, their satanic drone increasing in a kind of mantra-like fervor.

She could see now that they were all deformed; faces twisted into snarls, mocked by tumors, missing noses,

and worse deformities than even she could conceive. And there were two who seemed hidden beneath over-arching hoods, and she thought that, perhaps, they were the worst, though she could not tell.

"Ia, Ia, Shubbniggurath ... Shubniggurath neblod zin. Ia, Ia, Sabbazios...Sabbazios neblod zin...Ia, Ia, Yog Sothot...Yog Sothot neblod zin..."

It was a horrifying cacophony of dismal, droning malevolence, but she was thankful for it, if only because it seemed to occupy them, and distract them from whatever noise she might make here, in the only hiding place she had managed to find since the nightmare began. She clutched the slopping petrol can in her hand tighter, hanging onto the rusted handle like grim death. She wondered, desperately, if this secret hallway might lead to a small window even, or some way to get out onto the roof, and away.

If needs be, I'll douse myself in this, and throw myself on those candles. Better that than being a slave in a cage for these freaks to play with.

The farther down she came, the greater the cracks between the boards of the crude false wall became, and more, dim, dusty candlelight streamed forward. A few feet ahead, she saw that the way was entirely blocked now by an ancient crate spilling over with refuse; on top was an odd assortment of old burlap and paper sacks, equally encumbered. She felt her heart grow cold.

What to do? Go back, and risk the bedroom again, or try and climb over and hope there was some method of escape? She felt the walls and darkness enfold her; suffocate her. She was mentally past the point of no

return.

Suddenly, as the weird droning chant began to grow in intensity, she heard the heavy thud of the cow carcass hit the floor, as the animal mewled. She looked between the slatted boards, and saw emerge, from a well of darkness beyond her vision, the largest form on two legs she had ever set eyes on.

The immense body was clothed in filthy overalls, a ragged, dark flannel shirt that looked as if it had been ripped from the body of a hundred year old corpse, and heavy, crushing boots. The hands were covered in filthy work gloves, wore thin in the fingers so that the dirty stubs of them protruded from the whiteness. The head was hidden by a burlap mask, tied with an old length of rope at the neck. In one hand he held an immense machete, the blade of which had been wrapped in a string of dried, bloodied kerchiefs.

He moved forward with a heavy, ponderous gait, his footfalls vibrating the floorboards beneath their feet. He made the sound of a mastodon when he walked.

The cow had been tipped to its side, its foul, fat belly lolling outward obscenely, as it continued to struggle and mewl. Suddenly, with a solid slice, the huge, masked being brought the machete across the cow's abdomen, slicing it expertly.

Blood splattered out and began to run in streams across the floorboards, and then a great white discharge of fat slid out from the body.

The revelers went forward, huddled over and began to thrust their hands into the entrails.

Suddenly, a sound, somewhere between a guttural

choke, and the screech of a newly-spanked newborn, seemed to emerge from below them. They began to back slowly away from the carcass, in a kind of blasphemous reference, and the steaming entrails were in full view to her now.

They seemed to be twitching.

They seemed to almost be slithering.

In amongst the blood, and grue, something was living. Something was forming. Something was being born.

Tiny, twisted ropes of glistening bone shot forth from the body of the dead. At the end of each, suddenly blossoming into sight like some morbid flower, skinny digits dripping slime began to twitch. The arms reached over to grip the rough boards; the fingers dug in to the uneven floor for support.

A head broke free from the moist, pulpy bladder of its bovine womb; a cadaverous infant suddenly freed into a world that could only pray it had never existed at all. The face was a pulsating, oozing mass of exposed muscle and bone; the eyes were dun yellow pits of stupid, feral hunger.

It began to crawl away from its butchered surrogate, leaving a slug-trail of ooze and blood behind. The wet slither of its first hour of life made the noise one associated with the churning of bowels, the cutting into soft organs; the rending of fresh meat. It was a wet, dripping, organic aural oddity.

And the smell in the room had, suddenly, reached the point of being abominable.

Cinder felt her mind begin to slip in terror as she beheld the repulsive thing that seemed part fish, part

snake, part corpse; The bottom half of its body was a mass of coiled muscle, looking like the belly of a serpent that had been skinned.

Suddenly, she realized that she was screaming.

And then the partition of loose boards exploded inward.

The next moments seemed as if they happened in a kind of silly, fast-forward, as if, to cope with the full nightmare of having lost her humanity, of being reduced to the point of the single, animalistic urge to survive, her mind had been tossed aside to be a mere spectator at the struggles of her body.

Tremendous hands had ripped the boards of the wall to pieces, as she stood there screaming. It was The Hood.

She felt his tremendous, vice-like grip bear down on her shoulders with crushing intensity, and pull her forward. Suddenly, reacting purely from instinct, lost in the moment of terror, she brought the sharp end of the shattered bone she held clenched in the white knuckles into his forearm, with every bit of terrified strength she could muster.

He screamed, an animal squeal that was muffled by the hood tied around his face, and recoiled away as he threw her. She went reeling into the assembly of worshipers, the gas can she had held having been flung from her.

It rolled over onto the wooden floor, where it began to plug it's contents out in near silence.

She fell, trippingly, into the pile of slaughtered cow, fought to regain her feet, and found she was being

pressed downward.

She turned, and beheld the dripping, idiot form of the reeking horror that had just been given birth, as its face slithered across her midsection, its long, swollen tongue hanging limply from its mouth. She turned, screamed, stabbed with the bloodied sliver of bone directly into the creature's eye, and heard the moist pop as the eye exploded into a dripping maw of yellow pus. The creature recoiled, its macabre tail suddenly lashing like a spitting cobra in a frenzy of pain, and knocking an armful of the glowing candles off the altar.

Suddenly, the House of Hell was burning.

In the confusion, the beings who had assembled for this grotesque worship and birth became frenzied, losing their hoods altogether.

Cinder caught, in one brief, flashbulb-like moment, a photographic display from the freakery which was assembled around her. It was like a picture ripped from the mind of a madman's nightmare. They were hideous in their utter mutation. One entity, whose hood had fallen back from its deranged features, looked like it bore the visage of a man who had died vomiting a terrific bird; the lips stretched around a terrific beak which jutted forth, and squawked interminable surprise. The others were even more horrible morphs between man, and death, and corpse, and beast. Smoke began to waft up from the floor as the walls and everything else began to go up like a tinderbox. The creatures, seeming as if they were unused to so portentous a tragedy occurring, began to flap about in their black robes in terror and confusion. They had

momentarily forgot her, and for this she was thankful.

She dove, still covered in the sickening grue of the cow and the creature which she had assaulted, and began to crawl toward the imprisoned victim in the wire coop in the far corner of the room away from her. Below, through the floorboards, she could hear shouting and footfalls trampling up the stairwell.

She sprang before the cage, and attempted to pull off the top, but it was closed fast. She bent low toward the imprisoned girl, and looked deeply into her eyes. She realized that her throat was covered in a very dirty makeshift bandage.

They had cut out her tongue.

She reached toward her throat and attempted to speak, only giving out a grating rasp. Cinder bolted up and attempted the top of the crate once more, but it was locked firm.

She bent down, and said, " I-I'm sorry...There's nothing I can do for you. You're better off dead now, anyway. You may be the lucky one."

But she need not have even bothered to beg forgiveness. She felt the looming presence behind her, rolled instantly across the floor, and barely missed being grabbed by an enormous, frenzied freak with hands that looked as if they were discolored and rotting from some putrefying disease.

It picked up the wire cage, and sent it hurtling through the air at her, where it exploded against the wall to her left as she recoiled into the smoke. It must have killed the girl inside instantly.

She stood, dove forward into the darkness of the

farthest wall, found that the boarded doorway had been shattered, revealing a staircase that went down into pitch black. She began to take the stairs at a run, not caring if she slipped at this point and broke her neck. She was headed downward into darkness, to go she knew not where.

The staircase went downward into what she assumed must be the basement. She stumbled in the darkness, tripping over what old bones, detritus, and refuse she could not at all see. Just ahead, as she groped like a blind girl, wondering when the nightmare might ever come to an end, she realized she was going to have to find some way out, or she would die down here as the burning ruins of the house fell in upon her.

Ahead, she thought she could, mercifully, make out a glimmer of moonlight. Her eyes began to let until things seemed to take on an ominous black form, but still a form, as opposed to being in total darkness.

She moved slowly.

She stepped forward, and kicked something in front of her.

And this was good, because she listened as it dropped off the edge of a narrow pit, and skittered down the sides. She suddenly reached in her back pocket, and felt her heart jump in momentary joy.

She flicked the cigarette lighter that had been snuggled tight against the butt of her jeans, and had stayed there through all of this.

She flicked the lighter. Just faintly, she could see the outline of a pit, dug into the center of the dirt floor. A few

more steps and she would have fallen in.

A few rats skittered across her field of vision; they would have bothered her once. She could hear something sloshing in the pit, and she crept forward now, cautiously, re-flicking the lighter when she lost the grip on the plastic depressor.

She could hear sloshing, and a kind of husky, ragged breathing. She felt her heartbeat speed forward infinitely.

Below her was the most hideous nightmare she had witnessed yet.

It might once have been a man, but no more; now it was a cadaverous thing that stood below, in filthy rags, it's putrefying flesh a mass of scabs and boils. It's teeth were rotten stumps in its idiot mouth, and it's eyes had the dull, lusterless laziness of the congenital imbecile. In it's arms it cradled what appeared to be the body of a small boy. Lazily, contentedly, it had been devouring the throat, its bloated lips glistening with fresh blood. As Cinder set eyes upon the body of the boy, a horrific realization, a kind of dread remembering of who she was, and what had happened, washed over her in an awesome wave.

Had she been schooled in art, she might have realized, with irony, the strange resemblance the scene below her bore to the famous painting by Goya, of Saturn devouring his children. As it was, she ran around the edge of the pit, hearing the thing below stir in the slush and muck, slowly drop its prey, in favor of scaling up the slippery sides of the dirt, and investigating this interloper in his realm. It made guttural noises deep inside of it's throat.

Cinder threw herself forward, and landed nearly a sprawl a crumbling wooden shelf. She wracked her chest against it, but barely felt the pain. She scampered upward where she had fallen, sending a pile of debris flying out beneath her, and began to bang her wrists on that single glimmer of brightness, which she knew now was a filth-encrusted window. She began to pound the brittle glass with her bare fists.

Behind her, she could hear it shamble towards her in the dark, hear the slow, grunting breath, the sloshing, wet feet. It thought that it was being a cautious predator, but she knew.

Suddenly, blessedly, the tiny basement window cracked outward, filling her hands with splinters of glass, but she was insensible to the pain now, overcome with terror, with exhaustion, with a need to escape this hellish place and run as fast and as far as she could, until death or help overtook her exhausted frame. She began to pull herself up, the glass and splinters of the window frame digging into her palms, as blood trickled down her wrists. Suddenly, she felt a hand reach out in the darkness and grab her ankle.

She pulled, licking and screaming with all her might, as smoke from the burning dwelling began to waft up around them, filling the night with the blessed residue of this accursed place.

“Ahhhhhh!”

She screamed in agony. It had sunk its rotten teeth into her ankle; was clawing her clothes off, but she had already managed, with strength she had not known that she possessed, to pull herself up and outward, her waist a

mass of bleeding cuts, ground glass caught in the folds of her skin.

She kicked backward, and It continued to reach feebly out the window, clawing the smoking air, as finally, limply, she took to open ground, and ran for her life.

She ran across the open, weed-choked fields, not daring to look back, although she knew that the dread house was still burning behind her. They were not pursuing her; apparently, they were too overcome by the fire to care.

If Cinder would have looked back, she would have seen the hideous, shambling throngs of the family go out, into the night, seeking refuge in the craggy hills, the deep hollows; abandoned cemeteries, creaking, rotted churches, and old, decrepit barns. This was the way of them; it was not the first time they had been cast out, loose and alone upon the earth.

She ran through a hog-pen, her feet ankle-deep in pig shit, and for a moment she was even happy at the high, cloying reek of the manure. It smelled fresh; it finally, smelt like life.

She climbed over fences, ran through wooded patches, and down moon-lit country roads, and she never let her feet slow down. She ran till there was nothing left inside of her, until her heart felt like it might wear through like cheap tissue, and her legs felt as if they had disappeared beneath her. She lost her consciousness in that run, faded out into a kind of dark obliviousness; one might wonder if she was running asleep.

The countryside was silent, and dead around her; the hills dipped up and down in the harsh, white light of the

lunar eye. Houses of creaking timbers and old mysteries settled into a country sleep. And still, as this darkness began to settle into the wee hours of early morn, Cinder ran.

Mary Bellows put on her apron, wiped out her eyes, looked in the bathroom mirror, wished she could go back home and go to bed, reached in her purse, fished around, and pulled out a handful of cheap over-the-counter speeders. She flushed a few down her throat, took a swig of weak pop, felt sick for a moment, kicked herself in the ass, and told herself that she had to work today come hell and high water.

“Just some things you gotta do,” she said to herself, “don’t mean you gotta like it none.”

Thankfully her old man would be out on the road for the next two days. That meant she was free to have a little fun on her own time.

She went out into the dining room, liking the smell of the grill as it fired up, thinking how good that first break was going to be, sitting over a cup of coffee and a cigarette, in her own little world for a whole fifteen minutes.

She felt her speeders kick in, went back into the kitchen (which was even grungier than usual for as early as it was), and bent down in front of a white plastic bucket for a rag. She took her time, squeezing the disinfectant and water out until the rag was dry enough to carry out to the counter, and occasionally looking over her shoulder at the cook.

He was a tall, good-looking boy; maybe nineteen or

twenty. Red hair, pocked complexion, but tall; well-built. He had an eagle crudely tattooed on the back of his right hand.

He had probably been in a few scrapes.

She was interested. And she had caught him giving her the once-over, a time or two, as she bent over to wipe up a spill, or pick up some plates for the bus tub.

Hell, all men did it. But she had caught him more than once, which meant that he was either not getting any from his old lady, had just gotten out of jail right before hiring on, or he had a sex drive that was out of this world. In any case, she figured, it was time she took him home and showed him why older ladies always did it better.

He had a Marlboro popped into the corner of his mouth, as he lazily flipped eggs and sausage, dripping a few beads of sweat into the food for extra flavor.

“Hey, boy!”, she said, standing and putting her fists on her hips. “You know you ain’t supposed to smoke in the kitchen.”

He turned, put a finger to his lips as if to say, “Shoo! Our little secret”, and then went back to flipping. He was smiling.

Ordinarily, if she had caught an employee smoking while cooking food, she would have reamed his ass. But the last cook they had was a fat, sweaty little man that was every bit as physically appealing as a pile of warm manure, and, well, she was determined that now that they had a decent looking man in the grill area, she wasn’t going to waste the opportunity.

“Oh, I guess this is just supposed to be our little secret, hmm?” She said, allowing the merest hint of a suggestive

lewdness to creep into her southern drawl.

His smile tightened around his cigarette, and he turned suddenly, and gave her a very noticeable once over.

“I suppose it is...You good at keeping secrets, girl?”

She smiled. She put her hand out, and trailed the tip of her finger along his forearm and traced along the tattoo to where it ended at his bicep. She say that it was a faded, curling snake, wrapping it's tribal tail around a heart. It was really an ugly, poorly-done piece of work, but right now she didn't really care.

“You like tattoos, lady? Huh?”

“I...I think tattoos are sexy. I got some.”

He laughed. She liked his laugh; it was sort of throaty, and soft. She felt her insides go a little watery as her pulse quickened.

“Ah hell,” he said. “I know *yuns do*. I been scooping ‘em out back here, flipping these damn hamburgers.” *And also, he thought, watching that ass shake around the dining room while you're taking orders. Gives me a boner just thinking about it, mama.*

Her own tattoos were visible up both arms, and across her upper chest. They included tribal designs, an iron cross, and an eagle that was never finished, with wings that stretched over her breasts in flight.

“Well, sugar, *them's* just the ones *you can see with my clothes on*. How'd you like to get yourself a peek at the rest of ‘em?”

He felt the crotch of his jeans grow stiff with a maddening, intense erection. He contemplated, for one white-hot moment, simply dragging her back in the storeroom and raping her.

But then she said, looking sideways out the counter window, half-nervously, "Say, what you doing after work today baby? Wanna come over, have a beer? And maybe," she put her fingers to her lips as if she was sucking an invisible joint. He suddenly felt like the Gods had smiled upon him.

"Hey," she said softly, "my old man's going to be out of town for a couple days...nothing to worry about."

He reflected for a moment: last time someone's "old man" was going to be out of town, he'd barely escaped with his skin. As it was, he couldn't afford to get into trouble. The last time he had been up in front of a judge, it hadn't been a pretty picture.

But his hardon was demanding action. And it was the one authority, in his short, bitter life, he had never been able to defy.

"Sure thing hon...Sure thing."

Out in the dining room, a few lonely truckers sat, chilled to the bone, in front of steaming cups of coffee. The rest of the dining room was pretty bare, oddly enough, except for an occasional cop, and Elmer, a man of questionable mental fortitude, whose job was to clean litter out of the gutters in front of the store, pick up trash in the parking lot, sweep, mop, scrub the toilets, throw out rotten produce, and generally serve in the lowest capacity of an already menial position.

He had once told Mary Bellows that the C.I.A. had implanted a microchip in the middle of his forehead. She at first didn't know whether to take his seriously, until one day she had picked up the old baseball cap he perpetually wore, as it had fallen from the coat rack, and

discovered that he had taped tinfoil into the lining.

She supposed this was an attempt to stall of the space alien signals the government was beaming into his forehead. She started to ask him about it one afternoon, but found him picking a particularly hairy booger out of his nose with one long skinny, nicotine-stained finger, and it made her so sick she had had to run out of the back and across the dining room into the john, where she vomited up a combination of phlegm, soda pop, and breakfast gravy.

After that, she had given the little freak a wide berth.

Becky Lou suddenly popped up in the window, demanding, "Them eggs done yet, y'all?"

He popped a couple on the plate, handed them out, and then grabbed her by the hand.

It was slow right now. Real slow. Plenty of time. And a man had to have something to get him through the day.

Pete Martell sipped his coffee and tried hard to shift his interest to the morning weather reports. He was hauling a load to Sarasota, and already felt like he had been awake for three days straight. He had been popping speeders like a madman, but hew knew he was going to have to take it easy for awhile. You couldn't afford to make mistakes; the highway was unforgiving. He had already had a near-miss or two in his short career as a truck driver. Everyone always told him, *third time's a charm, Pete.*

He always thought about Jack Riley whenever he worried about falling asleep at the wheel. Jack had been a trucker for fifteen years, had carried loads from one end

of America to another, and back again, and was as good a man as any at judging how far he could go with no sleep, and remain alert. Then, one lonely night, he had pushed it as far as he could go, his knuckles burned white into the steering wheel; the music in the cab blasting heavy metal. He had been popping ephedrine, but it was simply making his scalp crawl with prickles. Then, suddenly, he must have hit some kind of mild black period.

There was a man killed in the resultant pile-up; decapitated, his body had been enough to make a rookie ambulance attendant puke. Other drivers and passengers were pulled out of cars and put on stretchers. Some simply limped away stunned, holding their heads, checking to make sure their families were alright. The dead man had been in his car, alone.

Jack had been airlifted to emergency surgery; they really, Pete sometimes reflected, should have just let him go. What he was now was somewhere between an invalid and a circus freak.

A charity organization had paid, graciously, for some reconstructive surgery, but it made little difference. Jack Riley crawled along between two canes, like some kind of goddamn crab, and his muscles--his pride and joy--were now limp, flabby white ropes; perfectly useless.

His face was, obviously, the worst. Jack had a face that looked like it had been rearranged by fucking Picasso, and then put back together with a garden trowel. It was a heavy scar hidden by stiff, unnatural flesh and a few, putty-like facial features. He looked like something from a damn Halloween spook show. He was grotesque.

They had been good buddies once; had spent many a

drunken evening chasing tail, watching titty dancers twirl around the silver pole, and chugging an endless succession of cheap beer. It had been glory days.

Now, Jack sat in his filthy old house, collecting his disability checks and mainly cursing himself, the world, and the God who made them both. His yard was run-to-riot, his windows were always dark (except for the minimal blue glare of his new TV), and it got to where Pete didn't really want much to do with Jack anymore. It was just so damn hard to sit with a former pal and watch him lock like hell, live like hell, drink like hell, sob like hell, and stop living.

He hadn't stopped by there in a few months, actually. For all he knew, Jack might even have up and decided to eat the barrel of that old shotgun he kept locked away in the glass cabinet in his cluttered kitchen. It had belonged to his father, and his father before him.

He sipped his coffee, looked through the paper, got up, tried to fiddle with the wall-mounted television but could only get a fuzzy channel or two, sat back down on his stool, took a look at his eggs, thought about Jack Riley, lost his appetite, lit up a cigarette, hacked a little, felt bored and miserable, and then stared out the glass doors as the darkness gave way to the milky, trickling light of sunrise.

People had started to trickle in more and more, but it was still, oddly, pretty sparse in the dining room. Suddenly, he saw someone emerge, slowly, from the field at the edge of the parking lot. He did a double take, as the figure seemed to amble slowly between the gas pumps, like a sleepwalker or something. Suddenly, his mouth fell

open.

They had secreted themselves in a closet in back of the storeroom, and she had lifted her waitress skirt for him, hiked her leg up on a couple of unused boxes, and he had pulled the biggest goddamn prick she had ever seen in her life, and then said, softly, "You like that little girl, huh? You want me to stuff your bunny with that monster?"

Actually, when he had her in his arms, all could think of was his skinny old Aunt Lola, and what it had been like the first time he had fucked her. He actually preferred girls just shy of thirteen or fourteen, but he had a raging monster full grown in his jeans, and now it had to be sated. He leaned her back against the wall, and she braced herself, and then he popped it in as hard as he could, leaving her gasping and moaning.

"We gonna have to be quick about this girl! C'mon!"

"Oh fuck yeah! Oh fuck yeah! Oh, *jeezus*, oh baby--YES! YES! YES!"

She began to rock back and forth with his bucking thighs, the boxes beneath her ass shaking, and she reminded herself that they had to be quiet and quick. God forbid the owner should come in right now. God forbid.

Becky Lou was starting to get backed up up front, and was wondering just what the hell Mary and the new cook had disappeared to, and what the hell they were doing. But right now she was too busy scratching out orders from increasingly steady flow of people that began drifting, like some sort of sudden gust, through the glass doors.

“Okay, hon, so you want eggs and bacon...check. And you want those eggs scrambled or over easy. Hum? Scrambled, okay. And you want hash rounds? Okay...”

She thought to herself, *Where in hell is that bitch at? Disappeared with the new cook. Well, whatever the hell it is they're doing, they better hurry the hell up!*

Pete looked out the glass doors at the trickling light of dawn, awash in the gray sky like the early morning headache after a long night's drunk. Then, he saw something move at the edge of the parking lot. A thin wisp moving slowly on the corner of the tarmac. He rubbed his eyes, looked closer; thought maybe he was seeing a ghost.

All of a sudden he stood up, moving quickly to the glass doors, and partly opening them, looking out.

Pete had served two tours in the 'Nam, before being sent home Section 8. He had crawled his way through a psych ward or two to make it where he was now, and where he was now, he knew, wasn't great. In Vietnam, Pete had seen things that he hoped to never see again in his entire life: child whores, the aftermath of a brutal gang rape, severed body parts laying fresh beside a trickling stream. He had seen men that had become animals, and men that had been reduced, through torture, to a point where they seemed like they had disappeared down the black hole of man's hopes and fears about the human condition. He stared at the white wisp that was shambling, slowly, toward him; he thought, for a moment, that he was having a flashback.

She looked like the walking dead. Her face was filthy, her clothing torn; her hair was matted to her blood-

streaked forehead, and she had the faraway look in her eyes of someone that was going to need years of intensive psychiatric treatment. Pete had seen that look before, and it never failed to raise in him a feeling of almost primordial angst and horror.

"Girl?", he found himself calling out, standing in the doorway, before he even realized what he was doing.

"Girl! Hey, girl, are you?--"

She simply continued to shamle forward, near the point of collapse. Another shaking footstep, and she fell into a clump on the pavement.

He turned, suddenly yelling for the waitress to call an ambulance, and then started out the door. Two sheriffs, both of whom had been sitting on break at a corner table, suddenly got up and followed him out. They went outside, turned her over gingerly, and felt for a pulse. One of them was already on the radio to dispatch, and was assured an ambulance was on the way.

Becky Lou, who had stopped working for a moment herself, and had been watching over Pete's shoulder, felt she knew exactly what had happened to the girl, and raced into the kitchen again, yelling, "Hey Mary, come on out here! We got some girl out here's been *raped!*"

Curious, she stepped into the back hallway behind the kitchen, and heard moaning and shuffling coming from behind the walk-in closet where they kept the dry goods. With half-a-smile curling her lips upward, she grabbed the handle and pulled the door back.

She laughed; it was a scene, exactly, as she had expected.

The new cook was buried to the hilt of his massive

member between Mary Bellows' skinny old, white thighs. She was sitting atop a rapidly crumpling pile of boxes, and his skin-tight jeans were down around the tops of his cowboy boots. Her own waitress uniform was hiked up to her waist.

They both turned, with startled looks on their faces. The comical thing was, was that he couldn't stop thrusting, but merely continued to the inevitable explosive orgasm that was building to a crescendo in his loins.

Becky Lou laughed loudly, said, " Well I suggest y'all hurry the fuck up, because we got some girl just collapsed out here in the parking lot, and an ambulance is on the way."

She then slammed the door, turned, and went out in the dining room, all the time thinking about how , unless she wanted all two hundred and fifty pounds of her drunken, mildly-psychotic trucker husband to find out what she had been doing at work this morning, that that bitch Mary Bellows was going to be real nice to her from now on. *Real* nice.

Part 2: A History Of Horrors

Chapter 1

She had been at the hospital for such a long time, she could barely, now, remember what life had been like

before.

It wasn't, of course, a proper, hospital: it was really just an old house that someone, long ago, had decided to renovate for the purposes of keeping a few, a handful, of mentally ill inside. Within the confines of those long, dark hallways. In the corridors of madness, and babbling, that was where Cinder was now.

It had been, finally, the decision of the State as to where she had ended up. The judge had leaned long over his gavel, his nose a wintry point of dispassionate jurisprudence, and he had intoned, but not sharply, that "young lady, we cannot credit your story, nor do we have an explanation for any of the vagaries of your case. We do feel that, as a ward of the state, you should be confined to the care of Drs. Childless and Lament until it is deemed you are in a fit and proper state to care for yourself. Until that time, I have no alternative but to remand you to the custody of the Holloway House. Court is adjourned."

The gavel had ringed down upon her life, and her mind had reeled a little bit as she walked out of the courtroom. Elizabeth had been with her, her special friend from the State Sanitarium, and she had said, "They say wonderful things about Holloway House, Cin. Really. I'm sure they can help you--on an individual basis--with the kind of special care that you need, that we just can't see to at State."

She had turned to look at Elizabeth as they both stood out on the courthouse steps, in the trickling sun of a world that was vanishing around her ears. A world that was threatening to swallow her whole, if ever a world could. Well, damn it, they had made their decision, and

she must trot along to the beat of a tune she wasn't aloud to sing.

She had gathered a few meager scraps of belongings, a couple of books; even a mental hospital room can hold found memories to the uprooted, and she had said her good byes to what staff she could tolerate. She reflected, as she was driven out into the country, out into a world that had spit her up last year, undigested, and unsure of just who or what she was supposed to be, that she was--essentially--just a quiet little dot. No memories. No richness. Just a vague recollection of something terrible that had occurred long ago. Something involving pain, and loss, and screaming...

She had blocked it out of her mind. It was better that way, wasn't it? Just block it out and let it ride along, somewhere in the subconscious, waiting beneath the layers and folds of the brain. Like an agent. A sleeper agent in a terrorist cell of her own being. Would she ever remember her identity?

The backseat of the car was separated from the driver by a thin wire screen, but she knew they didn't consider her any kind of a violent risk. She was, often, relegated to the role of imbecile, anymore; but she had made friends with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth knew that that wasn't right. Had found it out in deep conversations which had lasted for hours into the night.

She remembered those conversations with the pretty young therapist with a deep sense of yearning. Elizabeth was yearning too. She was unhappily married to a man she didn't love. Didn't even particularly like, anymore--and he had become, she suspected, a cheat. Cinder

remembered the night, in the confines of her hospital room, when Elizabeth had embraced, had held each other, and suddenly, began to kiss. Elizabeth had run her hand up the cool side of Cinder's leg before she realized what she was doing, and the kissing had become violent, impassioned. Cinder didn't even know what a "lesbian" was, but she knew that she liked this. But before it went any further, Elizabeth had turned away from her, had picked up her clipboard, and had begun to shake somewhat convulsively. She then stammered out that she had to leave, and Cinder did not see her very often after that.

Pity.

But Cinder was use to being left alone. It was the way the world treated you, when you couldn't even remember your past> She had no real past. No home for memories to rest in had she been able to even recover them. She reflected that this made her, in a strange way, free. She had no suppositions about the past that would interfere with what she wanted to do in a year, a month, a day. Now, every day could be a process of discovery, and the world might never be the same for her twice.

Holloway House was a grim, gray structure that like of which had probably not been built in over one hundred years. It was a vast, sprawling, limitless, edifice of brick--three stories high--with a seeming multitude of wings, additions, abutments, and crawling over the face of it all a kind of stonework one never saw outside of the grand old architecture of a bygone era. It would have been, if not for the shroud of perpetual weathered gray that seemed to

envelope it, a remarkable, even unearthly, feat of achievement. And, of course, the windows would be made of Plexiglas, and barred. Also, as inaccessible as the place proved to be (and, she noted, it was set quite far back from the main road, in a twisted maze of dirt road cum driveways that veered into a variety of sheds and barns and additional storage places) it was surrounded by the obligatory barbed-wire security fence. Electrified?

In the front seat next to the driver was Mrs. Renault, an old French bitch that liked Cinder as much as the average person likes an ingrown, fungous toenail. Mrs. Renault, however, had not the slightest ounce of courage, and therefore, pretended, that she was the number one rung of support of a steep ladder that had first been crafted by the State Hospital. Also, she spoke English with only a minimal accent of French, and no dialectical difficulties whatsoever. So much the better, thought Cinder, to be able to tell the old bitch off right before she climbed back into the hospital car for the ride home.

"I told Dr. Elmer that you wouldn't require a police escort dear. He was vary wary, but I told him we never have a problem with you anymore, and that, besides the lack of your memory--your, am-nes-i-a--that you had recovered sufficiently to be a part of the normal routine of things. Oh driver, you must let us off at the main entryway."

As if he didn't know that. Bitch.

The main entryway was a beautiful set of glass doors with a fanlight, but obviously reinforced and possibly impossible to escape out of if locked. Cinder had begun to note these things from a very early age. After all, her

memory stretched back a little over a year. All she had known in that time was the low wail of the mentally ill, the sterile whiteness of ward walls, and the frenzied speech of those who muttered silently to an alien god that only they could feel in the pits of their souls.

Many men who had been forced to take up residence in the state hospital had whispered to her furtive things; secret things. Plans of escape. Fantasies of what they bloody well wanted to do to the Head Nurse, to Dr. Gunard, to their own mothers. They had taught her some secret things. There were fantasies of freedom too desperate for even the ears of the sane world.

One had tried to rape her.

He had failed. Miserably.

The staff had begun to make sure she was kept far away from over stimulated, sexually undernourished, and completely unrepressed males. After all, a patient assaulting a patient in an "expert facility" was an unheard of and intolerable incident, and it didn't look like poor Mr. McKuen was ever going to be able to piss the right way again.

But now here was Holloway House, a less repressive, less sterile environment, but a mental facility none the less. Judge Akne was not just going to let her go to some damn inner-city tenement house for ex-druggies and prostitutes. Not his girl. No. This one had been a star patient, had made it into the news; was, in fact, a celebrated item, hot on the list of superstar fringe personalities, celebrated on tabloid tee vee and in tabloid pages. THE FORGOTTEN CHILD...WHO FORGOT HERSELF! Headlines screamed while satellites beamed.

She had no past: speculation created one for her. She vaguely remembered being in a dark place where people were killed. Of a-a-a horrible man...and a good man...and a little boy. But they all must be dead, and no one knew just who in hell she was or what had happened to her or her people.

She sometimes made up a fantasy family. Dad, and Julia, and little brother, er, what's his name. The cripple, or something. But she knew this was as unreal a dream as the real world was a nightmare. The records had been combed for the missing; the files had been searched. Posters went up in department stores. She was outside; she belonged to no one.

"Come on now, dear, let's get you checked in and inside. And get you comfortable, and get your things put away. There's a good girl."

The driver (a large black orderly named Bonafacio Tyrone Collins, who was as friendly and subversively insubordinate as the day was long) said, "Yess'm", and got out, and let Cinder out of the backseat. There were no door handles back there, she noted again, with bland and knowing amusement.

"C'mon, honey, " he said. " Let's get ya'll inside fo' missus have herself a little fit."

Cinder smiled. She liked Bonifacio more than any other orderly. She would miss him.

Cinder got out, reached in quickly to grab her luggage, and began to follow Mrs. Rennault up the weather beaten stone steps. The glass double door swung open easily, one of them on each side, and Cinder walked on through.

The inside was deeply carpeted, the walls were a mild,

sedative shade of paneled brown, and the front desk was an immense oval of formica straddled by a collection of phones and a stray computer or two. This was the modern world. There were leather furnishings, a wall-mounted television in one corner, a soda machines, candy machines, a magazine rack, and to top it all, the first few straggling patients she would lay eyes on that day.

One was a horrible stooped woman with a great bulb of a nose and skin the color of cooked liver. She was missing more than one of her teeth. She approached, said: "They aren't not let the likes of young heathens in here, and harlots, and prostitutes, and jezebels, for, saith the Lord, all are detestable in the sight of--"

--"Betsy, you need to go and take your seat. Hi, my name is Rachel. I'm going to do your physical and then we'll have Becka show you to your room and get your toiletries and get you all settled in. Your name is...*Cinder*. Am I correct?"

Mrs. Rennault stepped forward, held out her hand, shook, pursed her lips, gabbled for a moment in a soft voice with the obvious Nurse, and turned, saying, "Well, *Cinder*, it looks like this is it, eh? We must say our *adieu* now."

Mrs. Rennault had started to reach up in a cold, stiff little hug, her arms held in a bizarre, plaintive outreach, her movements stifled by her drab overcoat, when *Cinder* suddenly pivoted, turned to Boni, and flew into his arms. She smiled Boni was warm; lovely.

"Take good care of yo'self honey. I might come and see you real soon."

"Thank you," she whispered, choking back tears.

As she slipped from his huge grasp she realized, with a deeper, all-pervasive, helpless sorrow, that he was fighting tears, too. She turned, and accompanied the nurse, Mrs. Rennault fizzling out in her mind like a smoldering ugly little flame.

She was shown to her a room, a spacious, if somewhat dull little rectangle comprised of bed, bathroom, and washbasin. In addition, not much furniture, There was a long wardrobe, cheap, and the walls were stark white, there was also a peculiar long mirror to one side. She supposed this was so they could watch her dress and undress.

“Now, you will be on suicide precautions for two weeks--it’s a mere formality--so I’ll have to take your shoes. I’ll get you some slippers. You’ve missed lunch, so I’ll have the kitchen send up a tray. Hmph,”

Nurse Rachel lifted her little luggage onto the bed with a tiny humph, began to paw through Cinder’s scant collection of items; this was something that she was long accustomed to, and it bothered her not in the least.

She had seen little of Holloway so far, except for a few long, carpeted corridors, but already she had managed to get a sense of the place deep inside of herself; she seemed doomed, at this strange stage in existence, to suffer the company of the forlorn and forgotten. She could feel the oppressive energy of madness stifle her breath, accompanied by what must be the strict and heavy-handed regimen of the place. It was another asylum, no better, really, than the last one. However, she would have to make the best of it.

Nurse Rachel helped her put her things away. Cinder could see, already, beneath the thin veneer of Nurse Rachel something nasty and stiff, something unwilling to share in the simple delights of humanity that other people took for granted as part and parcel of being alive. The cheekbones were pulled taut; the eyes, the large blue, merry eyes, betrayed not a hint of wrathful impatience beneath their phony smile. The hair was Aryan blond, the color of straw, and overall Nurse Rachel, she considered, was quite good looking.

Young. Pretty. She's the kind you have to watch out for.

" Well, it looks like your all settled in for the moment. We may need you to fill out some paperwork later, and of course, there is the physical. And, also, Dr. Elmer will want to speak with you personally. He speaks to all the patients personally."

She smiled. She had a singsong quality to her voice that was as fraudulent as a counterfeit dollar. She clasped her hands together in front of her, trying to look cheery and Christian. The gesture was lost on Cinder.

She stood there, quietly, her body feeling the inner pulling that it had always been tormented with. She reflected, for a moment, that there was, seemingly no difference between herself and the slightly-older woman in the nurses uniform who now stood there, inspecting her, looking for tell-tale signals. They both had all the requisite essential parts to adapt and move through life.

But there is a world of difference. And I know it, Cinder thought sadly, and plopped down on the firm little mattress.

"Thank you."

“Yes, well...hope you get settled in okay.” And with that, and a sort of cold little laugh, Nurse Rachel had hurried her skinny behind out the door and down the hall.

Cinder looked toward the window. The sun had decided to make it's face known to the trickling gray afternoon, and now a sustaining beam of sunlight, holding within itself a world of dancing dust motes, fell upon her face.

It hypnotized her. She reflected that the sun was not really the sun, but a massive life-giving star. Much the same as the wild array of stars she had stared out her window at when she was an inmate at State. Those stars had chilled her. Those stars seemed to be so many dancing eyes, strewn across the dark firmament of time in hateful, alien array.

I think I really am losing my mind this time.

She shivered.

She realized she was alone.

The medical examination had entailed a painful, humiliating probing by a gloved woman with immense body fat and few teeth.

“Ahh!”

“Sorry, hon. I guess I don't know my own strength. Stick your tongue out. Breathe for me. Lie down.”

Cinder was n a lime-colored room with tiled walls that seemed, on the whole, somewhat less sterile than any examination room she had ever been in. There were the few required anatomical charts on the wall, including a grotesque cross-section of the human head that would,

most probably, have been more in place in between the covers of some lurid “fringe” magazine devoted to experimental rock or serial killers. Nurse Bertha Maddox hovered over her in her immensity, a great gross woman that must have weighed on the high-side of four hundred pounds.

Her lips had been painted a fine ruby red, but they had roughly the approximate shape of a pair of old inner tubes, and the nose seemed like it had been twisted by some malignant designer of human forms before the world was created. Cinder didn't even want to guess what each individual breast must weigh, but she knew collectively it must have been staggering.

“Just a mere formality is all. Have to do it. Make sure you ain't got bugs or something.” Nurse Maddox carefully peeled off one latex glove, stepped on a silver pedal, and plopped it into the top of a shiny aluminum wastebasket that was, as far as Cinder could glimpse, filled to the brim with similar used gloves.

She lay her head back and wondered what sort of medical facility failed to regularly empty the trash, but as she had no memory for comparison, she let the thought slide away with all the others.

The Nurse waddled over to her, told her to take off the rest of her clothing, and coldly handed her a thin blue hospital gown. She would not be allowed to dress in “street wear” for at least two weeks.

“Suicide precautions, hon. Put it on.”

She was escorted back to her room by a large orderly with a slate-like, frightening face and a sullen demeanor. She thought his name was Jeff, but she couldn't be sure.

She entered her room, spied a tray on her nightstand, took a seat on the bed, and lifted the lid. She realized, suddenly, she was famished.

It was hospital food, maybe a little better than what she had at State, but right now she could have made do with tar paper. She tore into a slice of ragged beef, sopped up gravy with her bread, ate the instant potatoes and even the peas, which she hated. She even drank all the juice and the coffee. Her head seemed to be clearing a little.

As she ate, she realized that, next time she would be expected to join the others in the dining room. The thought did not cheer her. As orphaned from her past, from all knowledge that she was, she had an instinctual grace when she ate, a sort of genetic manners that was not shred by her mentally-unsound kindred. In short: eating with the insane was not in the least appetizing.

Again, she peered out the window, feeling inside herself a strange lost pleasure, a private rumination upon the solitude of her existence that was all her own. She felt she could look into those beams of sunshine as they cascaded across the face of Holloway House, across the well-clipped lawn and rolling hills and clots of trees, and she wondered if she could lose herself in all that glorious light.

And then, as she ate, she realized that she had begun to cry. Real tears. Slipping, lazily at first, down her smooth cheeks, and wetting her new hospital gown. At first it was a grief that she couldn't register; it meant nothing and had slipped upon her in much the same way as a virus will infect an unsuspecting host. But her nourishment grew cold in her teeth, and her throat filled

with tightness, and her chest flagged as she fought to recall a memory that was buried, somewhere, in the annals of her sleeping brain.

She continued to eat around the sobs. In an institutional setting, one learns to not waste what one is given. But she couldn't waste the release of grief, either.

Doctor Elmer was an unimpressive little man with a limp, and a round, serious face. She thought he looked vaguely turtle-like, but she kept her mouth shut.

"Well, now, Miss, how are you finding our treatment of you so far?"

She looked away from his eyes. She couldn't seem to stand them. They were somehow just a little too bulging; like the eyes of a fish. And they were terribly red.

"Fine. Everyone has been very good to me."

Doctor Elmer leaned back in his leather chair and ran a hand uncomfortably over the bottom half of his face. He was portly and compact. On his desk was a model sailboat. On his walls were paintings of the New England Coastline. His office was carpeted, his shelves were bulging with dusty volumes, and the smell of some pot potpourri spray or incense was heavy in the air. She realized, for the first time, that there was also some subtle music, just beneath the level of hearing, being played on the intercom system.

He looked at her a moment suspiciously, his jaw resting between his thumb, middle and index fingers.

After a pause, he stated abruptly,
"You've noticed the music, then?"

She nodded, and smiled uncomfortably.

“Yes. What is it?”

“Oh, ah, just something to soothe you. To soothe us all. This music of mine is playing all over the building. But it takes a special, attentive person to realize it. Tell me: do you find yourself to be a special person. Attentive?”

His manner seemed strange, but she said, “ I don’t know. I guess, the fact that everything is so new to me...I mean, well, you *know* what I mean.”

He smiled, a look that did not become his face, and leaned back in his chair. He looked rather arrogant at that moment, like he was surveying her from his throne, and she could feel his strange bulging eyes dance over her form. He leaned forward again, opened the thick manila folder on his desk, shuffled some papers inside, seemed satisfied, closed it, tapped his fingers on the desk, leaned back again, exhaled, and said, “ We are going to have to do something about that blockage, Cinder. That is your real name, I assume? Or at least it’s the only one you can remember. It says you were found wandering down the highway last year, hysterical. You had hurt yourself, or, somebody had hurt you, or --but what does it matter? You seem to have no independent power of recall. The authorities have failed in every attempt to identify you. It’s as if you just walked into our lives from some other world.”

She started to speak but thought better of it.

He continued, “What you do remember is very confusing. Very confusing...” He leaned forward again, thrust open the manila folder, said, “It says here, ‘...extreme traumatic stress, dissociative disorder, no known relations...moody...introverted. Sometimes

violent...” He thrust his head up suddenly and asked, “Are you going to be violent with us?”

She looked down. There had been several violent episodes, culminating in the wounding of the inmate that had tried to rape her, but she had managed to quell the beast months ago, and she was not even considered an escape risk any longer.

“No.”

He paused, said, “Well, good, Cinder. Good for you. We run a tight ship here. And we don’t take kindly to inconsiderate guests. And you are our guest, no matter what you may think. Hm. I’m going to prescribe something new. It’s tricky, but we’ve had incredible success with it.”

He reached into his desk and took out a prescription pad. He began to scribble, all the while talking.

“You’ll learn to like it here. They all do. Every one of them. Holloway House is a top rated facility in this state. We have our problems, I will admit, but we just keep improving with age.”

He tore off the sheet and leaned back in his chair. His bulging eyes considered her a moment. She winced. There was something about his gaze she--most definitely--now realized she couldn’t tolerate.

“I am an old hat at this sort of thing, Cinder, I am an *expert*, if you will, on the subject of the human mind. Nothing fascinates me more than that lump of cauliflower between your ears. We have to get it working properly. We ALL have to keep our mental warehouses in order. These,” and he patted his left temple with the tip of his finger, “are the repositories of our so-precious

consciousness. And consciousness is all there really is. Tell me: do you have any experience with hypnosis?"

She nodded. She had been hypnotized by a man they had brought in, back when she had first come to State. He had brought forth some confusing items, but it wasn't anything she had wanted to deal with, and upon awakening from trance she had done the best she could to quash it back beneath the layers of forgetfulness again.

It had been memories, incomplete memories, of dim people she knew as if in a dream. And there had been pain, and torture, and there had been murder. It was like a trip into Hell itself.

He huffed, leaned back again, eased out the center drawer until it rested against his bulk, and withdrew what seemed to be some sort of crystal suspended upon the edge of a chain. Suddenly, she felt the tedium of the interview lift. It was an exciting little thing to look at, for some reason. She could have sworn it flickered in different colors, but she knew it couldn't be more than a trick of the light.

"Yes. Yes, dear, sweet girl. Dear Cinder. I want you to look at this little crystal of mine. I want you to focus on this crystal of mine. Focus. Focus. Now, I want you to imagine I am showing you something you will never get to see again as long as you live."

Chapter 2

The history of Holloway House was long and strange.

Built one hundred years ago by an eccentric heiress,

who believed, wholeheartedly, in the pronouncements of every cheap medium who could catch her ear.

Her chief adviser in this respect was a small, crippled woman, of Slavic extraction, who claimed to be a relative of great gypsy seers that traveled from one godforsaken end of Eastern Europe to another to escape persecution. The woman, Madame Zemindar, was prone to go into fits of babbling and convulsion at times, when her spirits deigned to make an appearance. On several occasions, the spirits had commanded Mrs. Holloway to donate a considerable amount of money to one of several bank accounts held secretly by Madame Zemindar.

It was fortunate for her, we can suppose, that the spirits were so inclined to watch out for her personal welfare.

Mr. Holloway was, himself, a very well-to-do gentleman: having made his money in the manufacture and sale of munitions for the Army, he had reaped a fat wallet during one of several conflicts of the past quarter-century, and was, to put it mildly, a "gentleman of some means". He was also sadly indulgent of his hysterical wife, whose matronly manner repulsed him, but who he tolerated out of habit, and, we can suppose, a sort of cringing love.

It was 1873 when the spirits, speaking through the enigmatic Madame, first bade Mrs. Holloway that she should siphon off some of her vast, personal fortune for the building of a stately home in the foothills of Kentucky, on a mound of hill once sacred to a lost tribe of Indians.

It had been a sitting of some repute, and even Madame Zemindar had seemed thoroughly shocked when her Red

Indian control had, suddenly, vanished, and been replaced with another spirit. An unfamiliar spirit. A powerful, loathsome thing--although she never let on to the circle that this was the case.

Mr. Chelsea had been there with them, and Mr. Bigington, who was from England, and thought who, secretly; Spiritualism was "a lot of bloody nonsense". And Mrs. Piper had been there too, seeking to question her Great Uncle Waldo Pepper about where he had left a particularly important family heirloom that could no longer be located.

Madame Zemindar had felt everything happen as it did normally, at first: the spirit seized her, sent chills across her back, and, even if the transmission was only a faint one, she could use her considerable skills in acting, sleight of hand, and outright fraud to take up the slack. Whatever the case, she made sure she always gave her sitters their money's worth.

Mrs. Holloway, always an eager, breathless sitter, sat holding hands with the others; her large eyes closed very tightly, her milk-white marshmallow flesh very bright and cold above her stiff black collar. She could feel her heart race. Suddenly, Madame Zemindar seemed to twitch a bit, squeezed her hand tight, and said, "There is one here who would like to speak with Mrs. Holloway."

Madame Zemindar was nearly half in trance, but she could tell, with a little inward smirk, that Mrs. Holloway's pulse had jumped, could feel the quiver in her hand that told her the woman was half-mad for some spiritual message, some proof of the survival of the soul; of the beneficence of the "invisible world". Madame

Zemindar once reflected, while living out her last days in a very nice home she had purchased from the proceeds of all her séances, that out of all the people she had performed for in thirty years of mediumship, there were none so kind, so generous, so obsessive, and so damned *gullible*, as Mrs. Horatio P. Holloway.

“Yes? Yes? Is it Mother? Is Mother here with us? Oh, please tell me it is Mother!”

Madame Zemindar almost squawked. The spirit currently possessing a very large fraction of her conscious mind might be anything from Mephistopheles to the Angel Gabriel, but it was definitely *not* Mrs. Holloway’s mother. However:

“Yes, dear, it is I. I have come back from this side of the veil to give you a warning. A very dire warning...”

Mrs. Holloway seemed enraptured. For that matter, even that foul old Mr. Bington (whom Madame Zemindar had had to insist extinguish his cigar before the séance began looked for a moment, more than slightly amused. His facial expression was cocked somewhere between a grin and growing wonderment.

Then IT happened. The one incident in her thirty years that Madame Zemindar had not planned, nor had any careful control of. She never experienced it again, nor did she ever want to. It had damn near done her in.

The lights went out for her. She found herself floating in a black void, surrounded by fluttering, brilliant cloth.

In the séance room, she bolted from her chair and began to thrash upon the floor, while from her mouth issued a streamer of sickening, mucus-like substance. The sitters suddenly bolted from their chairs, save for Mrs.

Holloway, who clasped her hands together, her eyes still tightly shut, as if in fervent prayer and exaltation.

Mr. Bington produced a leather wallet, and attempted to jam it into the mouth--

"--She's having some sort of bloody seizure! She'll swallow her tongue! For god's sake Chelsea, give us a hand!"

Just then, the candles that had dimly lit the room were extinguished in a vile blast of wind that came, seemingly, from nowhere. Moans and strange yatterings seemed to float on the very air, and the noxious streamer of ectoplasm that had sidled like an afterbirth from the mediums lips had begun to crawl across the carpeted floor, while strange phantom glimmerings danced and coalesced in the darkness, sometimes assuming the shapes of human faces calling out for help; sometimes more hideous, indescribable shapes.

The ectoplasm moved like a fat, slimy serpent to a far side of the room, and to the astonishment of all, began to stretch upward inch by inch, and grow until it assumed the vague shape of a man--an exceedingly tall man--with a voice like a hissing adder.

Zemindar still lay on the floor, yet she had ceased to move; she was caught in some rigor mortis of agony, her face turned a pitiful and repulsive green and her eyes gone completely white. More foam and vomit began to issue forth, and in his panic, good Mr. Bington still had the presence of mind to turn the poor woman on her side to keep her from choking.

The strange hooded figure strode forward on dripping, glowing legs, and said, in a sepulchral din that seemed to

be gurgling water, " You must build... for us a house...A place, for the ones... who have been killed...Because of your husband and his dealings...You must do it now. Or...soon...You shall pay with both your lives."

It was a hideous thing to behold, looking like a giant, shimmering figure of molten wax. It seemed to drip as it walked, and pieces of itself fell from it's forearm as it raised its finger to point. Yet, noted Mr. Chelsea amazedly, not a piece of this material survived the séance.

Finally, it finished, "We will be with you always...and guide you. Do not fail us! WE ARE WATCHING."

And with that Mrs. Holloway promptly fell over, a and joined Madame Zemindar on the rug.

The candles re-lit themselves, the strange, glowing, flitting phantoms dissolved, and the hooded figure in dripping white vanished in clouds of strange fog.

Madame Zemindar was ill for a number of weeks afterward; shaking, puking, coughing, gagging, gasping ill. She didn't know if she would ever recover. Mrs. Holloway, to her credit, stayed with Madame Zemindar all those long, terrible weeks after ward, waiting on her hand and heel.

Mr. Chelsea quit the munitions business altogether, opened a series of children's hospitals and orphanages, began a mad study of the occult, and donated a considerable sum of his personal wealth to a Spiritualist colony in Indiana. He died well-loved, and sadly missed by those who loved him in life.

Mr. Binghamton, whenever asked by his several biographers about the incident, merely snorted, and said,

“Smoke and mirrors. That’s all it was. Mark my words: smoke and mirrors.”

He eventually sailed back to England, wrote twenty learned volumes on Etruscan pottery, ran for Parliament and lost, was fond of sitting in his study, smoking his pipe and wearing his tasseled fez, and raising exotic birds. He died an obscure figure, and nobody today appreciates the long hours he spent studying Etruscan culture.

Of course the house had to be built; of that there could be no question. Mr. Holloway was quietly indulgent, but he was often nervous about the vast amounts of money his wife was Spending. And the new home was in an inaccessible place, on top of a tall hill, in the middle of a backward county where everyone was genetically related to the moron living a mile down the road.

He would sometimes make mild protest, but his wife would have none of it. No, the Spirits had spoken. No, there was no point in arguing with her.

Several crews were hired for the job, all consisting of sturdy men led by a foreman who could barely comprehend the blueprints as they were being drawn up, night after night, by Mrs. Holloway, Madame Zemindar, and a quack architect named Holfgren who, among other things, was wanted in New York on charges of fraud. He was a prolific cocaine abuser who much enjoyed the vast sums he was being paid to transform the spirit’s instructions into workable building plans.

The house was never finished. In fact, never would be, for the spirits had made the sly suggestion that, upon the completion of the edifice, that her husband and herself

would be called "beyond the veil", and would no longer be able to occupy "these empty vessels of existence"--referred to commonly as bodies.

Day after day, month into month into winter, the strange edifice of dreams and nightmares began to take shape, exploding outward onto the jutting hill and covering the surrounding grounds like some misshapen fortress. Brick was laid and wood was hammered and sawed, and wagons came and went, and an entire encampment of workers had sprung up like a garrison of soldiers near the front lines of some impending battle. Money was no object.

No object, that is, save for in the eyes of Mr. Holloway.

Mr. Holloway began to grow violently cross about his wife's building plans. He had never liked that "gypsy wench with her crystal ball and her vague mutterings", and he liked the fortune he was spending even less. He had not been at the séance when the spirits themselves had commanded the building of Holloway House, and, even if he hit probably would have made little difference. He was skeptical, hard-bitten old man, and knew ever cheap trick in the book. But he was also loyal to his wife.

Several months later, during the winter and after he had begun to stress more and more that "for Heaven's sake Jane, just let them complete the damned place. I'm sure your spirits don't want the crew to go on building forever," M. Holloway began to grow ill. Steadily, violently, and worsening with each passing day, he took to his bed. Doctors and specialist came and went, but his only recourse, beyond morphine, was the company of his poor, deluded Jane.

She daily brought him his gruel, his "medicine", and a loving smile. He would reach up in the midst of his delirium and misery and touch her smooth, round face. His Jane; the only one in the whole world he had ever loved. Often a single tear would trickle down the side of her cheek, while he lay there, weeping and moaning. She gave him what comfort she could afford.

He died quite suddenly. There was no inquest. There *was* a lavish funeral, with business partners and a few political comrades, and several of Jane's closest friends, and a few curiosity seekers. All assembled could not help but notice how strangely serene the widow Holloway looked. She hadn't let a single tear drop from the side of her eye during the entire service.

At one point she had approached the casket, laid down a bouquet of flowers, and considered the face of her late husband. "Ah well...it isn't as if there is any such thing as death anyway. We'll meet again, my dearest."

And with that she sat down in the chapel pew, as strange and solitary a figure in black as anyone present had ever seen.

There was, almost, some trouble with a local tribe of Indians, who insisted the ground that was being built upon was sacred to their people, and, despite what the white man's spirits had told him, should not be traversed by anyone not of the tribe.

The tribal representative and several braves came riding in one day, armed--a bold move in an encampment of white men who hated Indians. The foreman, and Mrs. Holloway, and then Holfgren, all tried as best they could

to settle the dispute in one day, with no trouble. Finally the elder was invited to dinner, and, not surprisingly, it was Madame Zemindar who managed to convince the mystically-inclined Raven-Who-Takes-No-Flight, that all men worshiped, in essence, the same Great Spirit, and since the Great Spirit had commanded them to build this house, they were powerless to do otherwise.

Finally, after a sitting, Raven-Who-Takes-No-Flight agreed that, indeed, there was powerful magic involved. He promised that he would speak with the elders, and asked that his people only be allowed to use the land from time to time for certain, vague ceremonies that no one present fully understood.

However, in light of their need to keep the peace, they agreed wholeheartedly to his request.

Year after year, decade after decade, the strange building grew and grew. It's construction was now a central facet of the economy of nearby Bath, and not a few old men in later years recalled, with some fondness, their own turns as construction workers on the "Holloway House of Horrors", as it was now commonly referred to.

A more professional company might have kept track of accidents and fatalities at the building site, but after twenty years, and a lengthening list of unusual occurrences, it was a wise man that managed to compile them all for posterity.

They included typical accidents: men falling from scaffolding, sometimes to their deaths. There were a countless array of cut and mangled fingers, broken appendages, illness, fights, foulness, and dysentery,

common among any group of men living in harsh conditions for weeks and months at a stretch. And there had been two decades of men come and gain, and come again.

Occasionally, a horse stampeded and threw a rider, someone got bit by a wild dog, or a wagon overturned up the side of a muddy hill. Common.

But there were *other* happenings, stranger occurrences: several men vanished, leaving all their belongings, even their money. Murder was suspected, faintly, but dismissed. All of them had been well-liked; none of them had any known enemies in the camp, and their would have been no motive outside of robbery. It was a matter quietly dismissed.

Men reported seeing lights floating about the hills at night, "ghost lights", and some men spoke of a tall, black, bear-like figure in the bush, with glowing red eyes. Some men quit their jobs and refused to return, for fear of "ha'nts"; the rest trudged on, their need for money greater than their fear of any supernatural folklore then circulating amongst the camp.

There was an outright murder. Near the turn of the century, a large Dutch immigrant named "Slater" had grown incensed, for an indefinable reason with a man named Franks. To this day no one is sure what the fight was about, whether a slight real or imagined, but, whatever the case, the result was the same: Slater stabbed Franks to death in a fit of drunken rage one evening, several yards distant from camp. He had attempted to hide the body in the hollow of an old tree, and, upon returning to camp, had quietly retreated to his tent and

fell asleep.

The body was sniffed out by dogs later, but the animals must have already been at it, because the corpse, besides the plethora of knife wounds, looked as if it had been partially *chewed*.

Slater went to the gallows, forever protesting his innocence. To his credit, all the evidence against him was entirely circumstantial, and no one ever found the eight-inch blade that he had used to murder Franks.

But that is a different story.

By 1900 the house was livable, and Mrs. Holloway occupied it with an ever-dwindling staff of servants. By this time, Madame Zemindar was a very old woman, a very rich old woman in her own right, and had suddenly taken up roots and moved to the far-sunnier climes of Florida, much to Mrs. Holloway's dismay. Mrs. Holloway substituted Madame Zemindar with a series of less-than-satisfactory replacements, including one jittery old bird that called himself "Swami Yogananda", who was as much an Oriental as Mrs. Holloway was. Instead he was a thin, neurotic little man from New England with a habit of never bathing, eating with his bare hands, and going about the house stark naked at the oddest hours of the day. The servants, to be mild, hated the sight of him.

The edifice, which had finally nearly bankrupted even the vast economic resources of the Holloway fortune, was completed by default; when the workman realized they would not be paid promptly for the labor, come winter of 1901, they threatened revolt, violence, and arson. Mrs. Holloway, in turn, threatened to use her political contacts

to call out the Army, if necessary.

The result was simply that she, her small staff, and her great, hulking fortress were left in the black hills all by their lonesome. The final result of the building project was a vast, crepitating castle straight from the pages of a Poe or Dunsany.

The servants would not stay; more often than not, just the feel of the strange, lavish home was enough to drive them away. The hallways that intersected, maze-like, and headed towards dead-ends; the doors that opened onto empty space; the odd, non-Euclidean geometry of the walls.

And, then, there were the spirits.

Mrs. Holloway had, in her life, one of the great collections of occult volumes the world has ever seen. She was quite proud of it. Thousands upon thousands of volumes, rows of shelves lining entire walls, in a library that occupied a half-dozen rooms.

Beyond, in an alcove with a false door--made to look like a book case--was the entrance to the séance room. At this point however, Mrs. Holloway was tooling in the extreme end of ritual magic.

The small, octagonal room was painted vividly with scenes from, it would seem, Dante's *Inferno*: hellish figures, twisted in pain, bizarre celestial apparitions, macabre, snarling grotesquerie, and, of course, demons were all painted upon the walls in a crude fashion by the hand of an unknown artist. Presumably, he must have once painted banners for the carnivals, for at every turn one was reminded of the parade of oddities one would associate with freak shows.

Here was her private, very private, collection of occult paraphernalia, much of it very exotic, expensive, and imported from distant lands. Here African gods stood side by side with Persian demons, massive dusty grimoires from the forbidden collections of French, German, Italian collectors who, for whatever reason, found it more prudent to part with their beloved objects than hold on to them as slavishly as Mrs. Holloway had.

Here was an altar that had been constructed by a heretic monk in the seventh century; here were pentagrams, hexagrams, runic inscriptions, strange diagrams, machinery of an indefinable purpose, the material riff-raff of minds that had dared look into forbidden spaces time and again.

Here were her crystals, her collection of tarot decks, her totems bought for liquor from Indian shaman that had assured the white woman that they were keys to power, portals to the wealth of the unconscious psyche. Any visitor that would have happened into the room would have been, first, awed by the sheer bizarre nature of the assembled bric-a-brac. Then, they would have been chilled to the marrow, for in this strange, octagonal room, of every room in the house, a person--even a skeptical person--could feel the creeping cold and sense of isolation, the odd and subtle distortion in the temperature of the environment, and smell the strange dead smell that seemed a little like dead roses and whiffs of sulfur combined.

Servants spoke grimly of the library and the alcove séance room; not many remained after being confronted with strange knocks, bizarre voices that seemed to

emanate from everywhere, and nowhere; weeping women who disappeared as soon as you approached them. And of course, the legendary "hairy-man" that haunted the woods around Holloway House, and who, swore a Negro cook named Etta Crabb, once looked in at her as she stood by a kitchen window, its blazing eyes glowing with hatred for god and man. The kitchen staff mostly deserted Mrs. Holloway.

For twenty years she lived nearly alone in that dreary old place, advertising for help, hiring the first thing to come along, and then watching helplessly as they fled soon after, giving scant notice. Her once grand fortune had been depleted to such an extent, because of her building, that she was forced to sell Holloway Munitions for a sum large enough to support her the rest of her days, but not large enough to put her in the satellite of high society again. She became a relic: an obscure oddity, cared for at times by a Nurse plucked from her dwindling list of contacts, and a few loyal blacks who subsisted on what she paid them for what was, mostly, a futile effort to try and make repairs and care for the considerable grounds. Also, there was George Raven, an Indian who shared her passion for the pagan, and sometimes shared her bed. But George died in a hunting accident, and Jane Holloway just seemed to go on and on.

Finally, there were days and even weeks when she saw no one. Her Nurse had long since passed herself; the blacks moved farther north, to Indiana, Ohio, Michigan--she stayed alone, while the world grew up, changed, evolved, and left her in her macabre crypt. Even her powers had dissolved.

There were no more psychic flashes, no intuitions, no calls from spirit. She would have even welcomed this, but even the ghosts had seemed to desert her.

She would sit in her personal magical chamber for hours, in the darkness, waiting, listening; hearing only the sound of her husky breath. Nothing. Was it toying with her? Was cruelty its only form of delight? Where had she gone wrong?

She would sit on the upper floors staring out at the window, staring past the trees and down the hill and out toward the lights of Bath. A small town was growing up there, she realized, and leaving her behind. She began, finally, after many weeks, to hear the voices of spirit again.

Kill yourself. Come. Join us.

No. No, I won't.

C'mon. Kill yourself. It is Heaven here. And we have all of eternity.

No! No! No!

The house grew more vulgar, fell into a greater state of filthiness and disrepair. Often she would walk around the house in her ragged old dresses, her hair a wild, tangled mess, and talk with spirits, exhorting them to help her, to lead her.

Cans of food littered the halls and dining room; they had been opened and often eaten cold, with the silver spoon left sticking out of the top. Trash of every variety seemed to clutter in corners, and, she managed to put things in such a state of disarray that the house--her mansion--in time began to resemble the sordid dwellings of some filthy vagrant. No one called anymore. No one at

all.

She failed to empty her chamber pots; she collected newspapers, bits of cloth, old magazines, bent nails, wooden spoons, dead flowers, tin cans, dirty bottles, and junk, junk, junk...filth to such an extent that, later, as her body was removed from the place for its final showing (at a funeral attended by three warm bodies, including, amazingly, the incredibly old Madame Zemindar, who made her final journey from her sick bed in Florida for the funeral), one man commented, " I've never seen anything like it. We found forty-four jars of urine in that place. Things I can't even describe. She had been living up there like some crazy hermit for who knows how long. Nobody knew."

The townies did know though; she made the trip into town, in a once-grand "tin lizzie" that had fallen to rust and was barely operable, once a month for supplies. She spoke to no one, made no friends, and was regarded as an "old kook" and, an "old witch".

She was laid to rest in 1930, but the most shocking chapter of the history of Holloway House was still to come.

Her personal possessions were auctioned off to pay for her massive debts; she had, apparently, been barely scraping together money to keep the creditors at bay for years, and in her last years, was months in arrears on a variety of different payments. The auction, held in Louisville, attracted people from diverse places, curiosity seekers, and not a few individuals who had heard strange whispers concerning the private collection of Mrs. Holloway. Some of them looked to be Arabic or from the

Far-East.

Tongues wagged and legends grew. The house stood vacant, its boarded-up windows peering into isolation and gloom like some bizarre sentinel stationed on the borderland between reality and delusion. Its porches began to sag; its roof caved and leaked, and it became a weather-beaten reminder of a tragic woman's fate.

The property changed hands several times; each owner suddenly found himself, for a variety of reasons, too "spooked" by the dwelling to keep hold of it for long. A few, reportedly, met with strange, even bizarre "accidents", and one man vanished out of his bed at night, with his wife laying next to him--and never returned.

But there was one man who, after attending a land auction where the Holloway House and property was up for sale, thought that the building would be, absolutely perfect for his own purposes. His name was Dr. Harvey Lee Phogg, alias Harvey Lee Warren, alias Warren T. Cross, alias Fred Duggan, alias Fred Frogg, alias, *ad infinitum*. He paid the princely sum of fifty thousand dollars, which he considered a real steal. He paid for it with the insurance money he gleaned from the death of one of his eighteen wives--seven deceased, eleven living in various places, one in England.

He was not an actual doctor, but he had studied forensic medicine a great deal, as well as burglary, financial fraud, counterfeiting, rare poisons, abnormal psychology, disguises, and whatever else he could to further his aims in the world. We repeat: he was not a *legitimate* doctor.

He had also studied business with the crafty, beady eye of a vulture, and he was keen to use the bizarre, massive house for the purposes of business enterprise. Namely, he was intent on opening his own resort hotel for the rich and idle. Most everyone thought the good doctor was just a little nuts.

They were gracious in the estimation of his level of sanity.

Again, workmen were seen scrabbling over the face of the abandoned relic. Various teams of architects and builders were hired, fired, went unpaid, were handed bad checks, funded from mysterious bank accounts when the heat became too strong. The strange building grew stranger; it was filled with cheap furnishings, electricity was added, and, most especially, gas.

Upstairs rooms were converted into spacious, if somewhat plain, bedrooms, and the library was refurbished (though nowhere near its former grandeur) with a large number of leather-bound volumes, most of them various sets of cast-off encyclopedias obtained for pennies.

It was at this time that the tennis court in back was built, and Doctor Phogg even put in a makeshift movie theatre, with a number of comfortable leather seats and a wide canvas screen. He had his own personal collection of films he like to view in private, of course; stuff he had picked during his tenor as "Professor Max Marvell, Lecturer in Anatomy", at a cheap, grubbing carnival. Those films were the "blow-off" for the crowds of eager male yokels who would pay a little extra to see a "forbidden picture": a sex film. He had the blackest

collection of them he could find, and he had even worse things. The sorts of films that are destroyed by police departments after being used as evidence.

He realized that dining was going to be more difficult to come by, but he had contacts in New Orleans, a colored hooker named Dion that would, gladly, serve as a cook if he paid her enough. He smiled behind his little curling moustache (he was tall and good-looking and mustachioed in the manner of silent film villains): his guests might not like dinner, but most of them wouldn't be around long enough for desert.

His final death toll was seventeen, although many true crime historians place the number slightly higher. Full-page advertisements had been taken out in the *New York Times*, among others, and Dr. Phogg had managed, slowly, to attract a few wealthy clients with his stated offer of a "rustic weekend resort".

Once the guests were settled in, they immediately began to realize something was amiss. Only a scant handful of rooms seemed livable; the rest of the building was, largely, in a state of rampant disrepair. And there were only one or two colored servants. And the food was *terrible*.

Dr. Phogg was careful to be very selective as to his choice of victims. He would pick off only the most elderly, or the very young and impetuous. The local coroner could be bribed into falsifying a death certificate, and the fate of the deceased was twice put down to suicide, three times to heart attack, and several times to "misadventure." Of course, whatever money or valuables they had brought with them became immediately the

property of Doctor Phogg, under the pretext of settling the hotel bill .

Travelers lured in cold from the open road were given a heavy discount--and killed the same night.

Bodies could be disposed of down a wooden garbage chute that led into the basement, where Dr. Phogg did a small side-business in pulling gold teeth, harvesting organs to sell for research, and performing hideous experiments with pet cadavers. Several times he had tried, unsuccessfully, to complete an act of necrophilia with a fresh female specimen, but found that he couldn't quite accomplish the task.

The luckless decedent could then be disposed of in a vat of nitric acid, and the sludge would be mixed with quicklime to dissolve the stench.

(It was in this basement laboratory, incidentally, that Dr. Phogg first heard the strange series of scrapings that alerted him to the possible presence of some unseen force, just beyond the moldering masonry. He knew, full well, that the foundations of this house rested atop a series of deep , largely unexplored caverns that stretched on for miles, and might lead even into the center of the earth. The possibility--coupled with the mysterious scratchings--inflamed his scientific thinking up until the very end.)

The unraveling of this criminal enterprise was unspectacular--no sleuthing genius ferreted out the specifics of the various crimes, although there was an increasing suspicion in several quarters, and a lackluster detective had finally come, under the pretense of being a traveling businessman, to stay for a few days and investigate. Before he could make much headway though,

an unfortunate occurrence brought his investigation to a rapid close.

An explosion in the sub-basement laboratory, due most probably to a leaking pipe and a lit Bunsen burner, brought the local fire department calling. The building was not, incredibly, engulfed, but the damage to the lower floors was extensive, and firemen poking their way through the ash and rubble were quick to discover pieces of human bones and remains, stolen goods, a system of gas pipes whose sole purpose could only be to asphyxiate the guests in their respective rooms. The flow of gas could be controlled from a series of valves in Dr. Phogg's office. Dr. Phogg, by the way, had managed to momentarily slip from view.

He was found later hiding in the surrounding woods, holding a clasp bag full of stolen and counterfeit currency, and a large bundle of documents relating to various and sundry criminal business dealings.

He was hanged after several months of astounding jail house interviews and sordid courtroom revelations, creating a national furor of interest that died as suddenly as it arose. Before his final walk toward the gallows, he swore that, barring an immediate and swift sentence of eternal damnation, he would do what he could to intercede with God on our behalf.

Holloway House stood vacant and abandoned again for another decade, its cloak of gloom and dilapidation snuffling out whatever life had once been lived and celebrated there, and whatever secrets crept within the dusty confines of its long, troubled history.

Chapter 3.

Cinder walked on clouds through the hallways, barely aware of the hulking orderly at her arm.

She felt as if the hallways were a thousand miles long; the doorways seemed to recede into bright pinpoints in the distance. Words were spoken to her, but they were like the dragging of tires, or an old, warped phonograph record played at half-speed. She realized they had stopped by a window where a very ratty-looking nurse had given her some pills, and then she had been led, swaying, back to her little room. The sunshine was very bright, and the diffusion of its glimmer as it shined through the window seemed to lend an almost ethereal glow to the hallways. She was taken to her bed, where immediately she collapsed, and could feel her mind sway upward, journeying to places where minds were not, usually, accustomed to go.

She was running in the dark tunnels again, voices moaning and screeching around her. She felt as if, at every corner, there was someone waiting, lurking, ready to pounce upon her frame and devour it. Glimmering colored lights flashed on and off in her mind, her mind of minds, as one vision faded into another. Now, she could see some people: Mother, Father, Brother--they stood in a kind of angelic repose, as if modeling for a painting of the celestial realms. Faces smiled at her; mouths opened and closed. Arms held her; she wanted someone, was searching for something that she could never, again, hope to find. Then there other images, images of blood; torture, terror, and mayhem. A hulking, feather-covered absurdity with claws for hands seemed to be chasing her through some lightless maze. A woman stretched out on a wooden rack, a headless man laying in a

puddle of dripping gore, and a boy--a poor crippled boy--skinned like a cat in a filthy bathtub. And these images assaulted her consciousness, in a rapid-strobe of psychic attack, as she lay upon the bed in delirious apathy.

Days faded into each other; Cinder was fast-losing any grip on herself. Whatever medication she was being given was wiping away the tough, rebellious surface of her being. She was being slowly simplified, she knew; but there was some comfort in this.

Walking was an effort, and every long hallway at Holloway house seemed twice the length as she crept down it, a frightened mouse, unsure of where she was, or what was happening.

She ate her meals mechanically, not caring, even, for the foul manners of those who slopped and slurped around her; one mouse-like woman with a very bad set of stitches on her forehead, lost most of her food down the front of her hospital blouse. At one time, this would have revolted Cinder, but she simply continued to chew the bland food as mechanically as she had since they had first given her the meds. Her mind was flowing outward into a long tunnel of its own design. When spoken to by Nurse Rachel or any of the other colorless, constantly-shifting staff members, her typical response was a vague, droning reply.

Most of the day, anymore, was spent sleeping, staring off into space, or simply trying to recollect what she had seen in those strange, terrible visions, when Dr. Elmer had first hypnotized her. What had those images meant? She couldn't let herself be dragged down by them.

Even the act of reading was too much, and, she also noted--still had the presence of mind to note--there were no current magazines or books available.

She spent several hours, one day, simply trying to become interested in an article in a 1976 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Her mind kept trailing away though. Did people actually live in houses like that in the real world? She didn't know, but she did know that, if they did, she would almost certainly never be invited to join them.

Family...I use to have a family, I think. But I can't think about that, now.

There were few recreations available to the twenty odd residents of Holloway House; staff mostly left them alone for long, dull, merciful periods. Everyone apparently was on a similar drug. The average conversation never lasted beyond a few moments.

When "talkatives" were admitted (and some occasionally did come in), they spent maybe a day blabbing about their horrible family backgrounds: abuse, rape, abandonment, homelessness, poverty. Cinder listened with one ear. She had heard it all before.

In a day or two they had their medications, and their dialogue dried up.

The sun rose. The sun set. Activities were planned by Staff. Cinder painted a few half-hearted sun catchers and brooded. She decided she may actually have died and gone to limbo.

During the afternoon periods, when the Staff retreated into cubby-like offices and did whatever it was they did

that was considered so important, so secretive, there was time for Cinder to wander into places she, most probably, was not supposed to go.

Her own ward opened up on the first floor landing, looking out over the huge central entryway and the Receiving Desk. It was occupied by Cinder, and a few rumpled disastrous women who were vast mental incompetents, and, in some cases even physically disabled. Cinder noticed there were plenty of empty, adjoining rooms, always locked, and she realized that this was , most likely, were they secretly observed the residents from time to time.

She had already realized the long mirror in her room was a two-way.

Observation is a critical part of the treatment here, she had been repeatedly told. But did they have to watch her get dressed and undressed? Did they watch her sleep? It was enough to drive you into paranoia and madness, not cure it.

But she did manage a considerable amount of wandering; Staff were, curiously, unconcerned about some aspects of how the patients at Holloway House spent their time. Cinder had walked, in her now slow, slightly swaying manner, past the receiving Desk, catching only a slight, scurrilous look from the nurse on duty, and had wandered back into the dining area. She could hear the whoosh of a sprayer and the clank of trays and silverware being washed. To one side was the dim, carpeted room with the wall-mounted set where they ate all of their meals, and to the other was the kitchen. She could hear heavy, black voices talking loudly, and she

ignored them.

She tip-toed down an adjoining corridor off the kitchen, a slim, pretty little ghost in a heavy white gown that was not, altogether sure what she was looking for. The hallway seemed to a thousand miles long, and was damned hot. She tried, curiously, the doors, and they were all locked> She walked further down into the darkness, leaving the kitchen sounds behind her, and the barking, jocular voices erupting in laughs and slang.

The corridor ended in a t-section, and she went left for no particular reason. She continued, lazily, to twist the handles of various doors. All locked. Finally, she came to the end of the hall: a wooden double-door of immense age, with sectioned glass that would have seemed more appropriate in a Victorian sitting room. In the midst of these yellow, painted institutional walls, it seemed as surreal as a flower planted in concrete.

Dimly, she realized this was a holdover from the original building, and she put out a few fingers and pushed. Amazingly, the door slid open easily, light cut through the darkened hallway, and Cinder entered what, to her limited mind, seemed to be a room as vast and sacrosanct as a temple.

It was a high-ceilinged room with oak paneling, heavy beams criss-crossing above, and the furnishings, what furnishings there were, seemed luxurious; even antique. High-backed leather chairs and deep, plush sofas shared space with handsome little desks and quaint, long tables. There was even a magnificent globe.

But it was the massive shelves, stuffed to overflowing with books, that really piqued her interest.

An old-fashioned library. And we are not allowed to use it.

She fought down a moment of anger. They were rare, but they did occur, specifically when she felt that somehow, her rights were not being taken into consideration.

She walked over to the shelves and began to examine the titles. After a few minutes, she realized, full-well, why it was the patients were never allowed in here.

She read the titles to herself:

Funeral Customs.

Witchcraft in Legend and Lore.

Sexual Deviation.

The Cycles of Izar, Satan and the Occult, Demonic Possession in Primitive Cultures.

Necrophilia and Sadism: A Study of the Limits of Human Depravity...

On and on it went. It was as if the Doctors (and she had only met Doctor Elmer and a woman Doctor named Zeena. The “expert facility” certainly did seem to be short on doctors.) had scoured the face of the earth in search of obscure books on black magic and ritual murder. It gave her chills. It was like something from one of the horror novels she used to secret away for reading pleasure, when she was at State. Boni use to give her the things when he was done with them, reminding her to, “Make sure ain’t none of these bitches know I’m the one who gave ‘em to you. But damn, if I was trapped in here all day, I would want something more exciting to read than *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.” Well, Boni would have himself a field-day in here, she thought. Suddenly, she came upon a volume that seemed even more unusual

than the others, It was a great read book of unbelievable age, and bizarre gold leaf on the cover. At first, she wondered if it might be some ancient copy of the *Koran*. Boni had told her about that book too, but he had never given her one. Although, often, he would exclaim, in a half-jest, "Praise be to Allah! I am victorious!"

But the book was in some language that she couldn't understand. Inside, horrible pictures portrayed a man laid out in a circle, his hands bound, while a number of robed characters shifted around him. Some of the characters...demons, she corrected herself, seemed to hold pincers, and instruments of torture. She felt icy fingers trail up her spine.

"Strange, huh?"

She spun around. She was not alone.

She turned, dropped the book, felt her heart jump into her throat.

Standing before her, in scruffy work clothes, as large and beautiful as the day, was a woman with the kind, hard face of someone who knew life from the bottom up. She was standing next to a custodial cart, and Cinder realized that she had become so engrossed in the library volumes that she had not even heard the double doors swing open.

"I, ah, don't think that you're really supposed to be in here, but I won't say anything this time." The woman shifted her piercing gaze away from Cinder for a moment, to the massive shelves of books.

"Isn't this place great? I think that little wet fart of a Doctor *owns* all of these. Part of some investment

scheme.”

The two women stared at each other for a long, interminable moment, and then Cinder managed to peep out,

“M-my name is C-Cinder.”

The older woman (she was maybe thirty) smiled, ran a muscular hand through her thick, chin-length black hair, and said, “ Well, you better not let them catch you in here, girlie. I imagine that Doctor is pretty secretive and stingy with *this* particular collection.” She walked toward Cinder, her boots chomping the hardwood floor, and Cinder realized just how incredibly strong this woman must be. Physically, she had the body of a brick-layer, and her skin was a tawny brown that evidenced a life spent working and playing under the sun, as much as possible.

“I’m Suede,” she held out a hand, and Cinder took it, shaking a little. The woman’s hand was big, rough; the palm was dry and raspy. Cinder could feel the strength radiating out from the palm, and it made her feel very good.

“I know, I know, the *name*--but, you see, my parents were hippies. They joined the Krishna. I grew up in a carnival. I use to work as a private detective--did you want the long, or short version?”

The women were immediately friends.

“Why would he want all of these strange books. They’re...”

“They’re creepy, dear. Yes, I know. Real voodoo shit. If you asked him--if the State came for an inspection, found

this place, and made some fuss about the books, he would probably give his official explanation as being that it was a research library for the study of schizophrenic and religious delusions...I think the weird old duck just gets his cookies off collecting the stuff. He must have spent a fortune. You know there's, like, a whole *subculture* of people that collects obscure books on black magic and other weirdness. I was in here the other day for some reason, and I just found laying open on a table a book of crime scene photographs. Stuff from like the Roaring Twenties. Real sick stuff."

Cinder said, " I don't like it in here."

Suede cocked her head, looked at her a moment and said, "Funny you should say that. Neither do I. You don't really notice it at first, then it starts to mount; a spooky feeling. A lost feeling. Do you believe in ghosts?"

Cinder shook her head.

"Well, we have them here. This building has some kind of history. A lot of legends. It was built by some kind of cult or something a hundred years ago. A lot of creepy shit has gone down here. People have died--right in here."

"Oh, c'mon!"

Cinder was beginning to warm to the woman.

"No, it's true: the Army use to use this as a hospital during World War Two. They brought the mental cases here then, too. Guys that lost it out on the battlefield. Guys that couldn't deal with killing anymore. Anyway, they brought them here. And well, from what others have told me, they have had more than one patient, you know..."

And Suede trailed a finger across her throat.

"Anyway, ask any of the other janitors, or the kitchen help: sometimes you hear footsteps in here when there aren't supposed to be any. Weird moans. Things get moved around. Hell, Lennie said he was driving home one night a friggin UFO or something followed him all the way out to I-70. Scared the shit out of him. And, ah...I was cleaning the offices downstairs one day, and I heard someone walk right up behind me. Turn around: nobody there. Pretty fucking weird, huh?"

Cinder shook her head in agreement.

"But don't ask the any of the nurses or their pet orderlies: their all bitches. Even Nurse Rachel, and damn, I don't mind saying, but that is one fine looking woman...mm. Oh, yeah, I guess I didn't mention--"

And Suede giggled. In a moment she was joined by Cinder, and two women sat one of the long tables, and became quick friends.

Suede Leonna O'Donnell had lived an interesting life.

She had been born in Michigan to a devout Catholic family that was determined, or so she claimed, that she would either grow up to become a Nun, or the wife of a lapsed Jewish dentist willing to convert.

"Instead I shocked the hell out of them, told them I liked combat boots instead of high-heeled shoes, and got my first tattoos when I turned sixteen. I like the girls. You don't mind, do you?"

Cinder shook her head.

"I've had another woman come onto me before. I've kissed another woman, if that means anything." She

quickly added, " I liked it."

Suede leaned back in her chair and considered. This could develop into a deep and grievous personal boo-boo if she wasn't cautious.

"Yeah...well, we probably shouldn't discuss that. I mean, I have to be careful. I do work here, you know. In fact they probably wouldn't like me just sitting on my ass jawing with a patient, would they?"

Suede smiled, for a moment, the smile of someone who was familiar with her own shortcomings, and almost resigned to suffer them. Cinder said, "I hate this place." Flatly.

"It doesn't surprise me. This place is...weird. I dunno. It's strange, even by 'nut hatch' standards. "She lowered her voice, leaned over the table a little, said, "I don't think this place is run very well, do you? In fact--"

Suddenly she stopped.

"In fact--what?"

"Nothing. Anyway," she said, changing the subject with a flick of her hair, and a wary turn of the eye, " I have to be careful, you know. I mean, you seem cool, but appearances can be deceiving."

Suede narrowed her gaze for a moment, said: "You also look strangely, *familiar*..."

Cinder shook her head yes, said, " I was in the papers. You've probably seen me in the newspapers back when they use to run my story. I was in the tabloids and paper a lot a year ago. I-I have amnesia--psychic shock, was what Doctor Lament at State called it--I was found wandering a country road outside of Shelby Heights. I have no memory of anything, er, or, well, I have a *vague*

memory...but nothing before that. I dunno."

Suede looked sympathetic. She said: "Do they think it could be some sort of abuse, or something. I've heard of things like this: people who suppress memories that are too much for them to handle...Have they tried hypnosis?"

Cinder didn't like to think about the answer to that, but said: "Yes. But not much luck. I don't like hypnosis at all. It always makes me feel really weird for days afterward."

There was a strange moment of silence where the two women just sat looking at each other.

Then Cinder asked, "Is all that stuff you told me true--I mean, about growing up in the circus and all?"

Suede became boisterous, "Well hell yeah! But it was the carnival, dearest. Not a circus. Mom and dad were hippies. Then they were Krishna. Then they were carnies. Then they got Catholic again. It was a long, strange trip. My first job was at a hot dog stand. My last one was following cheating husbands around, and snooping on people. I quit that job."

"Why?" Asked Cinder, innocently.

"I got tired of being shot at."

Suede suddenly looked, thoughtfully around, and said, "Hey, Cinder, can you keep a secret?"

"Yeah. What?"

Suede sat back in her chair and sighed. She knew, as much as she was enjoying this, that she would have to get back to work before Lennie the Team Leader realized she was "fraternizing with a patient". That was a job no-no, and she couldn't afford to lose *this* particular job. Not yet.

She suddenly felt a sharp pang of despair in her breast

for the girl that sat across the table from her, the only persona she'd met since she 'd been here who seemed to still have that glimmer, that essential sparkle in the eyes, that made human beings interesting.

Also, she admitted to herself somewhat guiltily, this chick was *cute*. *Really cute*.

"Hm...I don't see any cameras in here. Well, if so they're hidden. But if they come back at me later, they're gonna have a lot of explaining to do when I go to the press. At any rate: c'mon. I want you to see something."

The two women got up, and Suede led her over to the far corner of the room nearest the window. The view, she noted, overlooked the tennis courts that, to her knowledge, remained perpetually unused. A cloud suddenly flew over the sun, shrouding them in an immediate gloom.

There was a door at the far end of the case, locked, but Suede quickly retrieved her set of master keys and unlocked it.

This use to be one big room, but they've remodeled several times, and now all they store in here is old furniture. C'mon. It's okay. We'll only be a moment."

Cinder found that she immediately trusted this woman; it was a strange, giddy, powerful feeling that left her feeling slightly exhilarated and afraid all at the same blow.

Am I falling in love? She thought. *Is this love at first sight?*

She thought she should stop being stupid; she was desperate for a friend, for attention, and she had happened upon Suede (or, rather, Suede had happened

upon her), and now she was creating, already, some sort of fantasy in her feeble brain.

I need to stop daydreaming, she told herself. But that is all I have here.

The room beyond was a storage space for cast-off furniture, a kind of all-purpose dump for forgotten items that may come in use at a later date. It was dark and cramped, but the light pouring in from the doorway revealed that, at one time, it was the equal in size to the adjoining library. Cinder followed Suede through the maze of debris until they came to a large chest of drawers that must have weighed (or, at least, looked to *weigh*) somewhere in the neighborhood of one solid ton.

“Do you need any?...”

“Wait...”

Suede Leona O’Donnell gripped the massive old thing on its sides, and, with a strength that Cinder could never have believed she possessed, managed to scoot the thing out far enough to reveal a small, latched door that had been completely hidden by it.. Cinder could only gape.

Suede, huffing and puffing, said, “I also bench two eighty, by the way.”

“C’mon,” Suede said, popping the latch. The thin door swung open, and a sudden, noxious whiff seemed to flow outward. Suede choked, recoiled a bit, and said, “ I don’t know if it’s the pipes or what, but God does it ever stink in here! Whew!”

She produced a small pocket-flashlight, and walked in quickly, one hand held over her nose. Cinder had not known what to expect, but upon entering the room, she was astounded by what she saw.

It was a bare room of bizarre configuration, it's coming together at bizarre angles. And the walls were black, but it was the strange, frenetic mural that had been painted across them that aroused the greatest interest.

It was as if Hieronymous Bosch had been resurrected to decorate these walls; they told a tale of souls locked in a seemingly cosmic struggle, of hideous shapes unearthed from centuries-long sleep, to roam the world of men once more.

They were executed with the skill of some primitive sideshow banner: freakish demons--with distorted, mutilated faces--operated obscure machinery of torture and terror, and twisted primitive forms groaned on a variety of racks and were impaled on lean stakes set into a hard, icy earth that must have been drawn from the annals of primordial myth.

Cinder tip-toed forward, her blood freezing in her veins, and began to run her fingers over the designs. There were symbols too, an arcane runic alphabet and bizarre inscriptions that might have dated from before Babylon, or even Atlantis.

There was a horrible detail of a bloody, hooded woman with gaping holes for eyes. Her legs were splayed for the benefit of the viewer; she seemed to be giving birth to a dragon.

"My...God. Suede, what the hell is going on in this place?"

But her new friend didn't answer her. Instead she turned, looked at Cinder a moment with a smoky, wanton eye, grabbed her, and kissed her as passionately as she had ever been kissed before.

And Cinder didn't resist her one bit.

"You need to go now. C'mon. We've both been away far too long."

The women exited the room, Suede making sure to push the chest of drawers back into place, giving it a once-over with a cloth to make sure she left no fingerprints, and said, " Did you notice the paintings were all--that they were all newly done? The paint is still fresh."

Pause.

"I'm going to get you out of here Cinder. I can't explain everything to you fully at this moment, but there is a reason I'm here besides mopping floors and cleaning johns. I'm being paid as a sort of--*spy*. I'm working in my capacity as a private investigator. I'm being paid to work here and collect information. Well, I finally think I have more than enough now. And I'm quitting, and I'm going to report to my boss next week. I want you to be there when I do."

Cinder felt her head whirling, but it was a good feeling, not like the heavy, sedated feeling

"You can stay with me until you figure out what to do. I can get you a new identity, whatever it takes. I'm good at this sort of thing, you know. I have connections. But, dearest, believe me when I tell you this: this place is dangerous--there is something really fucking strange going on here. There is too much evidence, too many stories. Too many patients that seem to vanish from week to week."

The women stared at each other for a moment, and

then Cinder said, "Okay," and hurriedly embraced Suede in a terrific hug, and their lips met again in a soft, tender, passionate kiss.

"It will take a few days to get things ready," Suede whispered in her ear, and Cinder felt a hot jab of passionate excitement quiver inside of herself. She began to weep, softly.

"Shhh...it's okay. Everything is going to be alright."

A few days...In a few days I will finally be able to leave here.

The thought was as terrifying as it was wonderful.

The Doctor eyed the bank of television monitors of his closed-circuit cameras with a growing sense of interest.

Cinder No Name. Little Miss Jane Doe. There was going to be trouble. There couldn't be. Not now. Not while they were so close.

Fools. Didn't they realize that he had electronic eyes, button cameras, and surveillance equipment spread quite evenly and secretly throughout his entire facility? Did they think he was too stupid to realize the importance of keeping a close eye on everything at all times? He belched, quite obscenely, and got up, his knees popping like twin pistons.

He found their little romantic tryst interesting, of course; deviant sexuality had once been one of his areas of special study. But it could bear little importance upon the matter as it now stood. He walked from his desk to his bookshelf, slid it back quite easily (it was a false front) and revealed a doorway behind. He took out a pair of keys, rifled through them a moment, and then unlocked

the heavy, hidden door that led to the special facility in the basement. Beyond, he could already here the assorted chorus of moans and gabbles echo upward to greet him. And the smell, while it would have been noxious to another man, smelled to his nostrils sweeter than perfume.

Shit. Piss. Filth. Foulness . It was what was real about the world, if anything was, and since he had been indoctrinated into a deeper understanding of the ancient mysteries, he had seriously began to wonder if, indeed, anything was, truly, real, as it had been defined by man.

He entered, shut the door behind him, flicked on the overhead lights and began to descend, slowly, a long staircase that stretched down to a set of double-doors, always chained, made of thick wooden boards. It looked faintly, like the doorway to a barn, he thought, and that was appropriate.

He unlocked the heavy padlock and stepped inside. Immediately he was taken with a sense of immense pride at what they had managed to accomplish here, in Bath, Kentucky, in just a few short years--without any interference from the moronic yokels. They had turned a second-rate rate facility into a really fine place. A place that even the Gods could be proud of. He smiled. Irony was so amusing.

The room he entered was something a Dante Aligheri would have dreamed of; it was his own personal Hell, a dungeon of delights wherein his "hospital" ceased to be a hospital. He shivered. He could feel the dark energies accumulated here, could feel the misery and life-force being drained from the shuffling, moaning filthy masses

that had been cast down here, in the relative darkness, like the lepers of the cosmos.

He wandered into the midst of them, and while he walked, he could feel the layers of human flesh slip away, could feel his skin grow callous, lizard-like; he was shape-shifting, assuming the true form.

They left him a wide path as he walked, some of them cowering; most of them use to his ungodly presence by now. There were a few attendants sent down here regularly, to this dank cellar prison where shit and piss and foulness swirled into a soup on the floor. There were all his fellow believers, men who had histories of subterranean involvement: organized crime, Satanism, child porn.

And there were ones down here, like himself, who walked with the faces of earthly men, but who, beneath the skin, were crawling with the malignancy of the Forefathers--those who from Heaven to earth fell, and sired them long ago, before the oceans drank Atlantis. He knew that one of the Forefathers was asleep beneath the earth upon which this house rested, and, in time, when the stars were in alignment and the rituals were performed, and sacrifices made to propitiate the Dark Ones who rested beyond the veil, the Old Father would awake to rule once more.

"You!" he growled at a filthy, scrubby old man who was muttering to himself. The man had been down here in the darkness so long that his skin had taken on an unhealthy, white pallor. His eyes could have testified to anyone that he was mad.

The Doctor, by now a raging monster of grotesque

height and hideous shape, strolled over to the cowering, lice-ridden fool as he shivered there in his filthy rags.

“ How long have you been here? “

The voice that issued forth was a sepulchral growl; thick and harsh. The Doctor used one claw-like hand to grab the filthy shirt front of the mad old man, and lift him off the floor like a bundle of old sticks.

“How long have you been down here?”

The old man stuttered in terror. He felt his urine drip hot down his leg. His heart pounded against the emaciated cage of his chest.

He could say nothing; in fact, reasoned the Doctor/Thing, may have in fact forgotten the faculty of speech. He dropped the man in the scum on the floor, and strode into the receding of the dungeon.

He came to a series of rooms and alcoves; racks where half-corpses were stretched to the point of madness, chairs hooked to electrodes, horrifying dripping tortures, and whatever else their fevered consciousness could manifest as a fitting device.

He could feel the energy vibrate here, feel the rush of endorphins flood his brain with the energy of suffering. Here was purity. Here was suffering. Here were masses of drooling, pissing, shitting, wandering zombies.

Here was food.

He walked into a small, dark, bare room, in the middle of which was a chair, having attachments on the sides, and strapped into it a bound figure that seemed to be on the verge of succumbing from sheer terror and exhaustion. The Doctor/Thing strode inside.

The man's forehead was strapped back against the

chair, and his lips and eyelids were pulled back with curving metal fixtures. His teeth--yellowed specimens though they were--were mostly intact. They would not long so remain.

The Overseer reached down and grabbed a drill that was hanging from the chair by a thick electrical cable. Later, he would employ a corrosive acid to the teeth, while the suffering victim shifted between excruciating torment and merciful blackness. Later still, in a triumphal fit of exhilaration, the Overseer ripped all the skin from the face, leaving only the glistening musculature exposed in a relief map of pain and torment.

Suede sat in her car in the parking lot, looking up at the oddly-angled institution in which she had worked now for several months.

How was she going to get away with this? Most importantly, what was she going to do with the girl once she got her out?

She knew she liked Cinder a lot. And when Suede O'Donnell liked someone, she gave it her all. It was the way of her. And she had liked giving Cinder that kiss. The woman's mouth had tasted young and fresh. Her manner was willowy, and yielding. Suede shivered. She lit a cigarette.

She had her plastic security entrance she had been issued upon being hired, but she had no idea if the badge would open the gates after hours, and even if it did, she was damn sure that if she just drove up, after hours, and waltzed right in, she would be arrested immediately.

Taking Cinder out during the day, while she was supposed to be working, was no good either: she was here to collect info for her employer, period. Kidnapping one of the patients wouldn't look good when it came time for a complaint to be drawn up about this place.

No, she would get Cinder out, hide her, and do it her way. In the middle of all the heat that was going to be coming down on top of this place in a few short weeks, no one would be much the wiser about an "escapee". Only the state would finally get around to worrying about it--eventually--and by that time Suede knew she could get the girl a new identity. It was good. Suede was experienced in these matters.

She started up her car; it purred like a pussycat. She smiled at the fact that it had been a rather hefty advance on the part of her employer. It must have cost him a small fortune.

Not like he doesn't have the money for it, she thought. She pulled out, drove the long way around the parking lot to the back gate, and realized she was going to have to do a little recon and break out the wire-cutters. Maybe.

Cinder lived out the next few days in a flutter of anticipation and worry. Even the relentless battery of medications didn't seem to be able to quell her growing sense of tension. Every minute in the asylum was thudding hammer upon her brain, and she began to strain herself trying to seem as normal as possible.

The only salvation was the almost complete indifference of the staff here to her needs; patients here, she finally decided, were almost completely left to their

own devices. Save for the bustling of assorted nurses and orderlies, a token visit by Nurse Rachel--mostly to pry--and her glimpses of Suede (Suede warned her not to acknowledge her if she should see her "working" around the building, and Cinder had mostly been able to obey this with only a quick, furtive glance to betray her interest), Cinder continued to work through the molasses drip of minutes in the same state of seeming emotional detachment. The only exception was the token "group".

It was in a disused room on the top floor, with an exceptionally dusty linoleum floor and circle of plastic kindergarten chairs that several patients, including Cinder, were gathered, along with a younger, thin man in a button-down shirt and tie, and Nurse Rachel.

Nurse Rachel usually carried her clipboard with her, and seemed to be the one in control. The young man was politely observant, but Cinder didn't recall him ever having even told anyone his name.

Group was pathetic; with the exception of Cinder, it was comprised of a gaggle of almost complete mental retardates, most of whom had nothing to relate that was anywhere near comprehensible.

"The government has been putting stuff into my food...they put the microchip into my head. It gets to were it itches something awful."

As if for added effect Microchip Melba scratched compulsively at one worn, balding corner of her thin gray head. Nurse Rachel remarked, "Group...group, I'd like to know what the group thinks about what Melba has just told us. That she thinks that there are people trying to control her with electronic implants and things.

Anyone?"

Cinder looked around. Next to her, a thirty-five year old vegetable named Martin Dimesly buried his head in his massive chest, puffed out his cheeks and stated, "I-uh-I-uh-I-uh-I-uh think-uh-think-think-think-I-uh-I-uh..."

"Okay? Anyone else. Cinder? You're awfully quiet today."

Bitch, I never let a peep in here on my best days, thought Cinder, but she said, " Oh, I don't know. I don't know...I guess something like that is possible. Yeah. I could believe it,. But in Melba's case, I uh, think Melba maybe just ...having us on."

Nurse Rachel said, " Is that it, Melba? Are you just playing pretend with us? Or is the paranoia something you don't know if you can control."

As if in answer to her own question, Nurse Rachel suddenly sat up looked quizzical a moment, and asked, "Group, what do you think the role of fear is in our lives.? Is it important to be afraid?"

The haggard old man next to cinder let out a rumbling fart. There was a streamer of saliva hanging from the corner of his mouth.

It was several days later when Cinder learned they were instituting a special "movie night".

Everyone ambulatory, and a few in wheelchairs, were moved down to the Day Room past the Nurses Station. Cinder had been woken from a gentle drifting sleep in which she was safe in the arms of Suede O'Donnell. A large brusque orderly named Pete--whom she had grown to dislike more and more as the days progressed, knocked

on the doorframe with a clipboard, and said, loudly, "Wakey wakey. Movie time. Doctors orders."

"Huh? Wha--"

"Movie time. Downstairs. Pronto. Everybody."

Pete went on to the next room, stirring the rest of the ward up.

Cinder sat up, clutched her ribs. She had lost weight in the past few days, worrying. Plus, the food here was really bad. Worse, she hadn't caught a glimpse of Suede in a few days, and she didn't know if the plan was still in motion.

Maybe they would have popcorn, she thought half-heartedly. That would be good for a change. She put on her slippers, got up from the bed, threw her robe on, and shuffled downstairs.

Chapter 4

The old man looked as out of place in the seedy, bustling bar on Route Twelve as a United States Senator would look in a mosh pit. He sat, wreathed in smoke, his very old chin resting on the heel of his hand. He looked as if misery sat curled like a snake somewhere within the pit of his being.

His suit must of cost, at the very least, nine hundred dollars. He sat next to man that looked as if he didn't have eight dollars. But it was the old man's eye that kept them all at bay; he radiated a sense of power, of fearsomeness, that the bikers and scumbags assembled around him in a sea of bloated bellies and greasy, stringy hair, seemed to respect. Even with his sharp, expensive

clothes, his obvious age and sophistication, and his even more obvious wealth, he struck no one as the sort of gent you really wanted to tangle with.

He hefted a beer bottle to his lips, drank, sighed and put it down. He reached into his jacket, pulled forth a rumpled pack of Herbert Carleton cigarettes, picked one from the pack, and lit up. He did not smile, or change expression at any time. He rarely did.

In a few minutes, he knew, the female private detective would enter. She would casually stroll across the bar, sit at the stool adjacent, unload her purse on it, order a beer, and then slide her glance around to his withered old face and bald pate. He knew she didn't like looking directly at him. He knew why.

He puffed his smoke, whet his lips, and mentally blocked out the relentless throb of the jukebox. He wondered what had ever happened to common decency in civilization. Then he smiled, a hellish look on a face such as his. He knew the answer to that too.

Suede parked near the back, closer to the industrial park that surrounded this rotten cul-de-sac. It had taken her awhile to find this place, but it just went to show what a strange old duck "John Gallas" was.

She crunched through the gravel outside, pulled open the single wooden door, and went in. Some god-awful heavy metal was going to make conversation tough, and you could cut the cigarette smoke in the place with a knife. She could feel eyes grope their way over her.

She spotted Galls at the bar. He wasn't hard to pick out in this crowd. She managed to navigate some pot-bellied pool players and made her way to bar.

She sat down, put her purse on the counter, heaved a sigh, said nothing, ordered a beer, turned her head slowly, psyching herself, and said, "Mr. Galls. Fancy meeting you here."

His eyes seemed to smile for a moment. He raised his beer, said, " ah, Ms. O'Donnell. What, pray tell, finds you out in such--interesting--company this evening?"

"Oh. I don't know. Just thought you might like to have a look-see at these."

She pulled a yellow envelope from her purse, put it down on the counter, asked him for a cigarette even though she promised herself she was done smoking yesterday, tried hard not to brush his fingers as he handed it over.

She didn't like him. She couldn't explain it. It was something instinctual, not because of anything he had done in the handful of times they had met. It was something deeper, something she would never, quite, be able to identify. It was as if his face, somehow, changed, very slightly, every time you looked at it and then looked away. It was the sort of face that she found, for some reason, hard to get a grasp on; she knew she could never begin to actually describe him to, say, a police sketch artist.

But, regardless of his appearance, he was obviously rolling in dough. The contract he had offered her had been more than generous. It was much more than she was usually paid for mere private detective work. She thought that he must represent some secret government agency, but he had made quite clear from the moment that she had first signed on that she would receive only as much

information as she needed to do her job. Which, in his case, was virtually no information.

He took the envelope without saying anything, but he seemed almost as if he was just remembering why they were both there in the first place. She looked at him nervously. Mafia? No, he obviously was more dignified than that, nor did it seem likely that the Mafia would be interested in obtaining photographs from inside a mental institution.

He opened the envelope and began to flip through the photos, belying no emotion whatsoever.

Pause.

"That's all I've got so far. But I think its very good stuff. They're all there, including the negatives."

Pause.

"Weird. P-pretty weird, huh? I made sure to get pictures of some of the books--they're contents I mean. I think it has some kind of occult meaning...some sort of cult thing, or something."

Mr. Galls put the photos back, looked as if he was trying to decide something, then said, " You have done an exemplary job, Ms. O'Donnell. I thank you, and so does Mr. Creech, my employer. Here, is a token of our appreciation, which I hope you'll find adequate."

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a slim envelope, and handed it to her. She opened it, hesitantly, and stared in disbelief at the sizeable check she was holding between her fingers.

"The rest of it will be deposited in your bank account by tomorrow afternoon. Oh, there was one other thing..."

He trailed off, but suddenly his voice became a cold

bite, his rusty, rolling murmur seemed to shift tonally in a way that made it sound vaguely threatening.

She beat him to the punch, reached into her coat, and with a trembling hand she was trying, desperately to control, pulled out an audio cassette tape. This was her verbal “report” of her impressions about Holloway House in the months that she had worked there.

“I didn’t--I didn’t really see anything, besides that strange library, that would constitute...I dunno, *abuse* or something, if that’s what you guys are looking for. I did notice that a lot of patients seem to end up just...vanishing. New faces all the time.”

Pause.

“But that could be explained away--”

His eyes flashed from the cassette in his bony old hand, and bore into hers for a moment. *God!* She thought, *they really are piercing. Almost like two white bolts of lightning.* She looked away from him instinctively.

“What are your impressions, Ms. O’Donnell? That’s what Mr. Creech and myself are interested in? Can you tell me how you feel about Holloway House? What does your gut tell you?”

She leaned back, sighed, quickly and carefully thrusting check and envelope into the hidden, inside pocket of her leather jacket and zipping it for safekeeping.

She picked up her beer, swigged, puffed her cigarette, leaned over the counter closely, and said, “ My honest opinion, Mr. Galls? Do you want my honest opinion? Well, I think the fucking place is...bad. Wrong. Stay away in droves bad.”

She puffed on her cigarette, and considered. She was,

obviously, not dealing with sane people on either side of this particular fence. Why the hell did they care what she thought? Wasn't it only her job to get pictures...to obtain solid info? Well, she had done that. What was going on here?

Suddenly the music started up again, too loud for casual conversation, and she started to ask him if he maybe wanted to go outside and sit in his car. But before she could he rose, produced a flawless Stetson hat he had seemingly had secreted somewhere during their brief interlude, and said, loudly, "Good evening, Ms. O'Donnell. I believe your work is finished. Mine is just beginning."

And, he turned, striding magnificently through the sweaty, brutish crowd. She watched his back as he made for the exit.

As he made for the exit, a huge, burly gentleman was, apparently, blocking his path--albeit unintentionally. He was drunk, wearing a leather vest with a ghoulish patch on the back (a sign of his motorcycle gang, she thought to herself) and had a greasy mop of hair that looked as if it hadn't been washed in a little over seven months. His beard was dyed, she could see, a bright pink.

Mr. Galls tapped on his burly back--

"Excuse me."

The biker spun around, a fierce look in his face, and Suede thought *he's good and wasted. He's ready to start something. There might be some trouble.*

He turned, looked down at the nattily-dressed old man, started to make an idle threatening gesture (Suede could see the muscles of that massive, heavily-tattooed arm

begin to clench, even in the dim fog of smoke that surrounded them), and then suddenly thought better of it. Mr. Galls stood as defiantly still and unperturbed as if he had been made of stone.

Suede, who had started to half-rise from her bar-stool, sat back down. She realized she wasn't the only human walking the earth that most defiantly did not like looking Mr. Galls in the eyes.

The thuggish biker simply stepped to one side, and the old man walked out the battered wooden door. Suddenly, something clicking in her mind, Suede got up and followed.

She was a pace or two behind him.

He had just slammed the door on his way out.

She opened it a click later. She could still feel the warmth of his touch on the door (or at least she later told herself that).

She looked around. The parking lot was vacant. The only car worth driving out of this pit was her own new car, bought from the money that she had made working for Mr. Galls. And Mr. Creech, whom she had never even met. She walked to the road. There was no car driving away. There was only darkness down one long, lonely stretch of country road that seemed to disappear into an oblivion that felt as deep and black as the fear and longing in her own belly.

She hurried back to her car. She had no doubt that the money would be in her account tomorrow, exactly as Mr. Galls had promised. So far they had given her thousands more than she would have ever even dared to ask for from a client. It was almost as if Galls and Creech enjoyed

peeing their money into the wind.

Planet they're from, they got no need of money, she laughed to herself. What the hell have I just been a party to?

She started the car, pulled out, realized with a dawning sense of amazement and fear (as if she had just seen a ghost and not realized it for an half-hour later) that Galls had *literally* disappeared into thin air, slammed on the brake, started to hyper-ventilate, tried to reason with herself that there must be some logical explanation...after all, distinguished creepy old men that seemed to have stepped full-grown from the pages of a bad novel did not just disappear into thin air. There was logic in the world still, she was still Suede, and...

As she speeded away from the Route twelve bar, she realized that she had better leave well-enough alone. After all, she had amassed a small fortune on a job that, so far, had cost her nothing. It had been easy as pie, as a matter of fact, and she was entitled to take her earnings, live a little higher than usual, and forget this strange business. She almost felt elated, for a split second.

Chain-link fences and pre-fab buildings whizzed by the window, finally being replaced by dilapidated houses, old barns that had finally crumbled till they were little more than crazily-leaning shells, and miles of open fields and rolling hills. Yes, she should take a vacation. Maybe Hawaii. Maybe Bahamas. What the hell. She was loaded now.

Then, she remembered a promise she had made to a certain young lady. A young lady who, she was beginning to feel, might be in more trouble than she had at first thought. Suede felt a knot of fear grip her stomach.

She sped up.

The stars stretched across the country sky. Suede was torn suddenly, between what she *wanted* to do, what she knew she *should* do, and what she had *promised* to do...

But she knew, at last, as she sat in her living room that morning, watching the sun climb across the horizon, in a haze of cigarette smoke, what she was *going to do*.

Chapter 5

Cinder walked into the screening room, and realized that the movie had already been started. A haphazard collection of folding chairs had been set up, and those bound to wheelchairs had been rolled in and sat in front of the screen.

"Oh hi Cinder. Glad you decided to join us."

Nurse Rachel sounded anything but glad, and Cinder thought, like I had a choice in the matter, bitch. Then she realized they were, indeed, cooking popcorn in a little-used kitchenette to the side, and one of the nurses she didn't know thrust a little paper cup into her hand.

"here's some punch. Now, you have to drink it, and all of it. The rule tonight is no one wastes any snacks."

Cinder took the cup. It looked like Hi-C, and she sniffed it. She then drank it in one gulp, and handed the cup back, asking, "May I have another?"

To her surprise, she was given another cheerfully, her cup refilled from a giant plastic bottle on the counter. Cinder sat, liking the smell of the popcorn, and tried to get interested in the movie. It was, by god, a Disney cartoon.

My god, how old do they think we are here?

But then she realized, with a secret pleasure, that out of all the patients assembled, she was the only one present who was mentally stable enough to be cynical about sitting and watching children's programs for evening entertainment. She smiled, liking the dim, blue glow of the giant TV screen, and the subdued lightning. An orderly thrust a paper plate of popcorn at her, and yet another Dixie cup of juice.

Old, gnarled mouths gummed popcorn, and one severely-retarded woman insisted on laughing at every single scene, spitting popcorn from her withered old lips. Others, having known the sting of neediness in their lives prior to coming to Holloway, ate far more than their share of popcorn. Cinder was sure some of them would sneak handfuls back in their pajama pockets.

No matter. The Staff was more than generous tonight, for some strange reason. The popper was kept busy, and the juice seemingly flowed.

Cinder tried to interest herself in the cartoon.

Stupid mouse. Stupid female mouse. Dumb cat.

A cartoon world of cartoon people, and cartoon sounds, and cartoon problems.

Then, slowly, she began to become more interested.

She had never seen that particular mouse do that, uh, particular act with that particular cat.

Slowly, she began to realize something had gone wrong. These weren't innocent cartoons anymore. Her mouth began to fall open, a little, in shock.

She could have sworn she had just seen a cartoon duck bend over, spread his tail feathers, and let a cartoon hunter with a cartoon gun and a fat, pulsating animated

cock fuck him in the ass. With plenty of cheery, old-fashioned cartoon orchestra music accompanying every groaning thrust and heated moan.

A cartoon sailor blew a cartoon captain on a cartoon sea where cartoon fish were jumping from the water and saluting with cartoon fins.

A veritable orgy of furry animals began to copulate in a forest while several dwarves with massive, stout penises gang-banged a skinny, crack-whore facsimile of Snow White who took it in all three holes.

Cinder suddenly realized something was crawling on her plate. She looked down. Now she knew someone had a very sick sense of humor.

She dropped her plate, and bent over, retching in disgust. Her popcorn began to squirm across the floor. She could feel puke hit the back of her throat. On the television, a cartoon character said, "Well blow me, Skipper! Suck me fucking cock and then bend over and let me shove my bulging forearm up your ass!"

"Oh Olive, you slut, you got tits like a twelve-year-old girl!"

"Get away from me bitch, Blutto! Or I'll twist your balls off like a pair of gum drops and feed them to you!"

Cinder shot up from her chair, her head spinning, and realized that there were patients laying on the floor, screaming and crying and laying in puddles of their own barf. The room was spinning; her legs seemed to be a hundred miles away from her head.

A powerful hand suddenly seized her by the shoulder and forced her back around. She sat back down on the folding chair hard, and whoever had been at her shoulder

seemed to fade away into the swirling shadows and patterns of color that had erupted like fireworks clouds around her being.

Now, the cartoon sailor was chain-sawing the head off of his hulking rival, in a torrent of blood and gore. The skull opened, revealing a soup of bloody brains and bone fragments spraying into the distance.

Now it was no longer a cartoon. She was staring, in the middle of the screen, into some maddened dungeon where men were men and women were being pulled, limb from limb, with twisted metal hooks embedded deep into the muscles of their bodies. Skin-shredded faces stared out at her from beyond the prison of the two-dimensional surface, and begged for release from the hell that they had been condemned to. One man had his lips ripped away, until he seemed to wear a ghastly, bloody smile. His eyes were twin moons of exquisite, religious suffering.

His head filled the screen--exploded--burst from the inside by a wildly groping claw covered in scales. Behind him, on a coarse wooden table, a hooded man of immense size was peeling the skin off of a nude figure, perhaps a woman, until only the glistening moist musculature was visible beneath. The camera panned, lovingly, over piles of twisted, mangled dead; gaunt, chalk-white faces and empty eyes staring into the shifting patterns of colored light and dark.

Gigantic lips batted on slivers of human flesh.

Dead babies floated in bottles of dark, piss-colored chemical.

The floor was blanketed with teeth, bone fragments,

blood, grue, pieces of skin, tufts of hair; fragments of hideous births.

“No!”

She bolted up, began screaming and retching. Hands clasped her. Strong arms lifted her. Talons impaled her. It was like being caught in the grasp of a million slithering snakes.

She could see nothing now except the same charnel world that had been vomited up, frame after sickening frame. And, before she lost consciousness, she thought she had gone to hell.

She remembered a panorama of violent scenes. A tapestry of pain and suffering, victim and victimization, hunter and prey.

A macabre family of inbred, like something from a bad movie; the father was a stooped, knock-kneed freak with a pock-marked face, limp, filthy, straggling white hair, and clothes that hung from his body in strings of filthy cloth.

On a hook on a wall, trussed up like an animal, a haggard blond woman twitched, her legs streaked with filth, urine, and blood. She knew she must be crouched on the floor, her leg twisted beneath her; sprained, it would be hard to run if she managed to get away.

It was dark, but even in this darkness she could see a rough, filthy wooden table, piled high with rubbish, filth, and what seemed to be pieces of human skeleton. The father had come in for a moment, poked the haggard blond body with a twist of coil, mumbled gruffly for a moment, and then she could hear his heavy scraping

footsteps in the dust of the floor, could hear his thick, emphysema-like wheeze...She started to scamper forward, groping blindly, cutting her hands on the jagged filth which carpeted the wooden floor. Suddenly, she stopped; she could hear a macabre, grating gabbling noise, and she now knew belonged to the hulking, feather-covered beast with the steel hooks for hands.

She cowered, trying to pull herself into the deepest, blackest pool of shadow in the corner. Her blood began to freeze; her heart-rate had sped until she feared she might succumb to cardiac exhaustion.

It entered, and she had seen it before, although the events of the night were still loss in a flurry of gruesome images and agonizing terror...he had a horrible, twisted face, a congenital deformity that made lips and nose jut outward like some sort of mutant beak. His massive, shit-covered exterior was carpeted by feathers, which seemed to have been merely stuck on his clothing in fresh stains of blood and grue, and left to dry there. He wore a skin headdress in the same fashion.

But the worst aspect of his being were the lethal hooks that were strapped to his stubby arms in place of hands. The razor sharp tips must have tasted blood often.

The voice was simply a retarded gabble of hoarse, coarse, gibberish. This was a speech impediment of the sort that would defy all attempts at classification. He might have been gibbering in Martian.

"Bloo! Gabba gloobel yeep deep zabba! Akka akka whoop!"

It came in, it's massive, filth-encrusted boots clomping on the floor like the thunder of some approaching god, and laid a filthy burlap bag on the table, simply brushing

aside the pile of filth and setting down his burden in its place. The top of the bag fell loosely around the object, and the hideous oaf stepped back, let out a torrent of nonsense, in an almost reverential manner, and then turned and went back out through the mouth of the room.

Cinder crept forward again, her eyes trying to pick apart the yellow blur of the object on the table. She finally realizes what it was, in a burst of nausea and torment that sent her weeping, silently, back into the darkened corner, where she hoped she could crawl far enough back into the corner, into the shadows, to disappear from this nightmare world into which she had been pulled.

“No...”

Cinder clumped over into the chair, tears streaming from her eyes.

Dr. Elmer strode around the room, his hands clasped behind his back. He had to admit, she made as wonderful a specimen for hypnosis as any he had yet come across.

“Tell me more: can’t you tell me more? I want to know who these people were...or things, or whatever they were. Why do you think they wanted to do that to you?”

Cinder could see the same images play and re-play in front of her eyes, as if her mind was nothing more than the view screen of some video-projector, that projected the same horrific images over and over again as a continuous loop. She shuddered. She didn’t know if she was alive and dreaming or dead and remembering.

Doctor Elmer stared at the painting of a ship on his

wall for a moment. At the worst of times, he was able to force the image to move, to come alive; he could make the ship sail away on the blue sea, could make the frame wet with sea spray, could fill the room with the lapping of waves against the rocks. Once, on a whim, he had thrust his hand through the painting, into the wet, just to moisten his fingers. He could shape the world to his liking.

He was shaping Cinder's world, now.

He walked up to her, his crystal glowing on the end of his gold chain, and bent far over her, putting his hand on her tummy, mock-gingerly. Her breast achingly curved just above his knuckles, but he realized he didn't want to reveal himself entirely just yet.

Fresh meat.

It excited him. He would wait. They would continue to build this scenario, frame after horrifying frame. He would be the screenwriter and director. She the compliant scream queen.

"Tell me more. Tell me: whose head was it that was laid upon the table."

"I...I dunno...I..."

"I think you know. I think you know, and you just don't feel strong enough to deal with it. We must break through. You must remember why you are here. It's for your own good...Cinder."

"I...I...D-D-D-Dad..."

"Yes?"

"Daddy!" She said finally, angrily, the tears still coursing down her flushed cheeks, her chest heaving. Dr.

Elmer liked the way her breast rubbed against the top of his hand. He could feel his member become rigid.

“ Yes. They killed your daddy, didn’t they?”

“No!”

“Cinder...they killed your Daddy...and they killed your stepmother, uh, ah, Julia. And they killed your little brother Bobby. These...people...have killed a lot of others, too. They would have killed you as well, but you were too strong for them. You found a way to escape. They’re being hunted by police in a number of states...they hid up in the hills, in the old caves and out of the way places for years...but they’ve got away, for now. Authorities seem to think they may have all been killed in a mineshaft cave-in.”

“No...I...I don’t know...”

“Yes you do, Cinder...this is what we’ve been doing this whole time, going over it. We knew most of this information before, but we just didn’t know if you were strong enough, psychologically, to accept it all. So you had to do it yourself. Had to bring it out yourself.”

He rubbed her arm soothingly. He wanted to throw her on the floor, rip her robe off and have his way with her in a fashion she would find painful and humiliating, but he knew they would need her energy; they would need to build the terror, the torment slowly, for maximum utilization of her faculties.

Cinder could see, behind the darkness of her eyelids, the panorama of her existence as it had been: the high school where she had been an ugly, odd duck; the happy home in the suburbs, the cars, the family meals, the faded photographs of yesterday. Bobby playing on the lawn

some lost summer ago. Julia making dinner. Daddy...

Oh, oh God, it can't be true! I don't want it to be true...no, no, not Daddy and Bobby...I just remembered, I just remembered, I know them now...

"It was a horrifying, atrocity that happened to you Cin, but it's over now. You need to learn to pick up and move on."

He leaned farther over her, his nose almost touching her forehead, and she could feel for a repulsive moment, the tremor of excitement in his flabby hand. Her bleary eyes tried to register his face. She found that she loathed and needed him, right now, in the same perplexing measure.

Then she caught sight of something that brought her sense of horror to a whole new level. It flickered for a moment--on his face--in her field of vision, and at first she thought it was merely a trick of the mind. Then she reached down and felt the dry scales of his hands.

She was carried--screaming--from the office by two large, thuggish orderlies.

Suede was always a careful planner.

She had rope, a black burglar's outfit, a bag full of lock-picks and other goodies. She had a map of the surrounding area, and she felt fairly certain she could get over the fence, get inside, get the girl, and get out before anyone knew anything was amiss. It would be easy as pie.

And who would ever suspect her? She didn't even, particularly, care about any legal fallout. She could always claim she was helping a victimized girl escape

from the clutches of an abusive facility. If worse came to worse, Cinder and she could simply disappear. Hell, she had enough money to hold them for awhile in Mexico, or maybe even farther.

She didn't sleep well that night. She kept rolling around in bed, images of Galls and the weird library, the strange hidden room, and Cinder all dancing around in her head in various degrees.

At sometime just before dawn she awoke in a cold sweat, dreading, for some unfathomable reason, what was coming. She knew, dimly, that there was going to be more trouble than she at first bargained for; it might turn very ugly, very quickly. She had to be cautious.

She sat in her comfortable old easy chair, smoking one cigarette after another, and reminding herself that she, desperately, needed to quit. Even more so since, soon, she would need all the wind in her lungs just to get her through the night.

Cinder lay in a stark white room whose white-washed brilliance was matched only by the noxiously-bright fluorescent in the wire cage overhead. One of her arms was strapped in a precarious position over her head; the other was strapped down at her side.

She had been given a wallop of thorazine, she knew, and she had no idea now how long she had been out. She had erupted at the horror she had beheld, written on a face that had, moments before, been as still, as placid as a quiet country lake. Had she really witnessed what she thought she had just witnessed. She wasn't sure now. She thought, perhaps, it could be an after-effect of the

hypnosis session.

That's what they'll tell me, anyway, she thought, trying to shut out the vast brightness of the room around her. But she also, deep inside herself, knew better. She had known something was terribly amiss here, almost the instant she had stepped foot in the door those long, dull days ago.

Outside, she could here not a peep. The room seemed to be soundproof as well. She found herself groggy, easily slipping in and out of slumber. She didn't want to sleep though; after what she had just seen, she decided it would be a long time before she ever welcomed sleep again.

She was running in a green field, while all around her, legs that seemed to stretch upward like veritable tree trunks seemed to recede into the swirling mists of her memory. The scene was faded like a bad, old snapshot in a forgotten, dusty album. She looked for faces. The man and woman seemed faceless, incomplete.

She saw a boy; a poor crippled boy in a baseball cap that seemed to trail behind her in life, like some haunting phantasm from a killing she had committed in another life. He was faceless too. She thought, in a moment of agonized dream-logic, that there was something so terrible lurking in the air of the world, that she may well be losing her mind.

She saw a flutter of leaves, heard the report of a rifle in the distance. Was someone hunting out here? She could feel her child's heart race. The bird fluttered upward into a key that seemed as vast and blue and limitless as all of infinity. She could see it struggle to regain a sense of itself: losing feathers and flapping against the dry, hot currents. She thought she could almost see the missile in slow-motion, rocketing upward at an ungodly, blinding speed, just grazing the blur of motion that was its intended target. She felt her heart thump, and the

blood began to drive a pounding hammer of pain and intense anguish into the center of her skull.

The scene shifted. A car, careening through a pleasant suburban neighborhood, its driver a wild-eyed drunk, a maniac, a faceless mannequin seated behind the steering wheel. His eyes bore down on something ahead of him. She could see that he was terrified and enraged in equal measure.

The squeal of tires as the mannequin, miraculously, came to life slammed on the breaks. And then a resounding, pitched wail of agony that rose upward into that same blue, sunny sky, looping a reverberating with the terrified wail of a thousand hungry hopes dashed against the rocks of probability, and fate. It seemed that sound was all there was, and she floated in a white space.

Then that scream became something else, something even more miraculous than the initial sound. It seemed to fade into a static of shifting, hallucinatory sounds, electric choruses and droning wails. It was deafening, ear-splitting cacophony, and, at the center of it, and at the center of the whiteness around her, were huddled, hooded masses in a space that was too black to comprehend.

Suddenly, she saw it again: that face, that horrid, hallucinatory face, that brief explosion, or morph from one image another. It was hideous beyond description. The eyes were like deep pits of red hatred, with long cat-like irises; the face could only be described as some filthy, freakish variation on the face of a reptile. She saw the scaled hands, the hideous claws, could feel, all over her body, the rasp of its ridiculous, sickening flesh. And she could feel it radiate seething, malicious evil.

It spoke only one word to her, but it's guttural, sepulchral growl--the tones of a hungry beast--stayed with her long after

she jerked awake, nauseous, in a pool of cold sweat.

"Mine." It had said.

But it was enough.

She had wet herself, and she was starving. The whiteness would not go away. Now it wasn't just the sickening fluorescent, nor the stark, almost beatific whiteness of the walls. Now it was a lingering, incessant glare that felt cold for her; a sort of icy, illuminated frost that circled the fluttered around the room as if it had a mind of its own, blotting out the corners in the range of her vision. She shivered on her confining restraints. She felt as if she might be on the edge of Hell.

Now, all was forgotten as the icy claws of the mysterious, white cloud reached down with wispy tendrils to tickle her scant flesh. She could feel its immense drain upon her energy with each pass, and realizing for the first time--really--that she was in the presence of the inhuman, she became terrified. Really terrified; mortally afraid, in a way she had scarce experienced before. She felt like an animal trapped in the clutches of some obscene parasite she could neither grasp or fully understand.

She shivered as its cold tendrils licked her body. Its strange, white glow seemed to blank out the entire room now, and she resolved herself that she was going to be sucked of all the marrow in her bones and cheer in her heart; that this tenuous, intangible *thing* was going to steal the life-force from her tired form. And where would her consciousness be left, she wondered.

Her lips trembled, her hands quivered in their straps.

This could not be. Yet, it was. Was she dreaming some interminable nightmare that refused to end.

Suddenly, mercifully, she caught the faint forms of what must have been orderlies, like the shadows behind a frosted glass, coming close to her bedside. Closer they crept, like they were viewing her, fully, for the first time.

Like they were seeing her from the inside out.

Their clothes were hospital white. So were their faces. That was where the similarities ended.

She screamed louder than she ever had before. Her mind snapped into tiny fragments.

No human beings should have faces like that. No human beings.

The hills wrapped legends into their rocky embrace. Pale revenants of by-gone old timers, still trapped in the illusion of their earthly existence, still persuading modern earth-bounds to stop and give them a lift. A strange hairy man-beast haunted the woods here, there, or somewhere about, startling hunters and yokels and building up legends.

Some people even said they had had roadside encounters with tall, blond, friendly UFO occupants. Suede had heard all of the rural rumors, knew most of them by heart, and believed none of them. At this present time, she was concerned not with hairy spacemen, but with circumnavigating the winding hills and back roads around Holloway House, trying to find the best place to ditch her car, climb the chain-link fence, and skirt around the building until she could enter it relatively unnoticed.

Then, she would quickly head for the kitchen area, use

her own key (which she had carefully stolen from her supervisor, had copied, and then replaced within hours without him ever having been the wiser. For this task, she had had to fork over a few dollars and an IOU to a particularly dishonest tradesman in her acquaintance, noting once again how fortunate she was, at times, to have such seedy contacts) and head upstairs quietly, quickly, like every cat burglar she had ever studied. Then she would get her girl, hustle them out, step by step, go back the way they had come, if possible, and be off. She was already thinking about an extended stay in say, Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico might as well have been Mars right now, she reflected, as she maneuvered the car over rough, potholed roads and across gravel and through stands of trees and sloping hills.

She had passed a disused cemetery on the way here. She hadn't liked that. And she didn't like that hellish, bright moonlight much either. She was committing a criminal act tonight, one she felt reasonable sure she would get away with, considering the circumstances, but a criminal act none the less. She would have liked the cover of darkness for that .

She saw Holloway House rise up in the moon-wash gloom. There would be a Nurse at the front desk, a few orderlies and a medic perhaps; most of the staff would have gone home by now.

She had spent several hours that morning trying to talk herself out of it; after all, when Galls finally revealed, as she assumed he would, his suspicions about this particular institution--to the papers, or local television--them most likely , depending on his influence (and lets

face it, the man, and his unseen boss, were most definitely powerful, connected people), he would probably have the place closed down. She tried to tell herself that the kid would be okay without her. That she could visit her in a new place, a real hospital. That someday, maybe, they could be friends without any interference from officials, hospital, and all other such rot.

Her headlights ate the darkness in front of her in little eerie twin moons of vision. The world seemed still and dead, the trees looked like they carried sinister secrets in the dark spaces between their branches.

She had studied her area well for a few days beforehand; she knew there was a little cul-de-sac of trees that bordered on the old hill where Holloway house brooded. She would park at around one in the morning, wait for a minute, nervously smoking a cigarette, get out, walk through the small woods, make her way up the hill, climb the chain link fence (she was reasonably still sure she was in good enough shape to do this), and would walk through the largely deserted backyard area, past the tennis courts. And come to the back area of the house. There, she would make use of the service entrance, get into the building, navigate through the maze of downstairs hallways, take the bottom freight elevator up, and slip upstairs. Then she could grab her girl, get her downstairs and out, hopefully, before anyone was the wiser.

She went over her list of reasons not to do this again: possible jail time being the first and foremost in her mind. She knew damn well that if she was caught, she would wake up in jail, and matters would go from bad to worse.

No, she almost told herself, better to wait it out, see what happened...if the place was shut down, if the state stepped in and did their job, well, it would just be a matter of time before Cinder would be adjudged well enough to take care of herself. Suede might even be able to take her in as a legal guardian.

As she carefully navigated the car around another blind bend in the road, and through another dark stand of woods, and as the damnable moonlight turned the surrounding countryside into something that haunted the imagination with visions of loneliness and foreboding, she caught sight of Holloway, perched up the gathering incline of a hill, lost to shadows and all but official memory. She found her parking space, shut off the lights, prayed that a nosy sheriff wouldn't happen by anytime soon, and decided to park even deeper into the stand of trees than she already was.

She sat there a moment, getting her thoughts together. She double-checked everything, made sure she had the copy of the pass-key securely in her jacket pocket, and put on her favorite, lucky hooded sweatshirt. She always wore it when the job she was on was risky, and it had--she liked to tell others--never failed her. She hoped it wouldn't now.

She got out, tossed the cigarette, and could just see the faint glimmer of lights up the hill, through the trees. She began to walk, her steps quickening as she penetrated the darkness. She reflected, not for the first time, that she really did have to do this.

She had like that girl from the first time seeing her, and knew, of all the places in the world, she did not belong at

Holloway. And Suede had promised...she always made good on her word; it was a code she lived by, her "bread and butter" code, and it kept her in business.

In a few short years she had amassed enough experience in shady affairs, going after cheating spouses, white-collar crooks, men that stalked women in an insane and baffling "cat and mouse" fashion that defied logic. She had taken every case that came her way, had sat brooding in her office when none did, and she couldn't even afford to hire a secretary to do the typing. But she had always maintained. But she had learned from Jack, and he was the best that there was, a poor man's James Bond when it came to special cameras, phony documents, tracking people, espionage. You name it. He had been the only man she had ever loved.

Jack was dead now, and she said a little prayer as she walked, hoping the Good Lord and Jack Martin were looking out for her now.

She smiled, in spite of things. She could just see Jack, sitting on a cloud, a martini in his hand and his ruffled overcoat sprouting feathery wings. Jack would be sloshed, his old felt hat hanging to one side. And, my, wouldn't the Lord have a time with him?

She made her way up the steadily inclining ground, shivering at the chill that had, unseasonable, taken a seat on the air. The weeds around the fence were thick, you could pull yourself up by handfuls, and the fence outside was one tall mother, but she knew she was good, better than good, and getting over it wasn't going to be a too mean a trick.

She then saw Holloway House, from the back, a back

cloaked in uneasy darkness, and secrets that she knew were being kept hidden. There were staff there that weren't in the know: cooks, custodians, some nurse aide peons to whom this place was nothing more than another job. But she had seen enough in her short time here, undercover, to convince her that she wanted to do this. HAD to do this. It might not be in her hands anymore if she waited. And, well, she was a woman of her word...

Cinder came to in the darkness of the pit.

Around her, she could see that human body parts had been dropped, in haphazard fashion, and left to decay. The smell was one of earth, mildew, and intense putrefaction. Her vision adjusted quickly though, as the top of the hell looked out into an underground chamber that seemed to be lit by flickering flame.

Her mind reeled; she had no idea, now, what they intended to do to her. She was thankful only that, for the time being, she was away from those hideous...things...she didn't know what the hell they were. It was as if the world had gone off its rocker, and the real people had been replaced by monsters from some bad b-movie feature. She sat, miserable and afraid, in a darkened circle of the pit.

Suddenly, her pulse jumped. She thought that she could hear, faintly, a sort of weird dusty moving about down here. Close to here. And then an imperceptible hiss, like the escaping of steam.

Oh god, they've left a fucking snake down here with me!

She tried to burrow into the packed earth of the pit, tried to lose herself again, in the way she always dreamed

of: fade-out, no more, good bye cruel world. Instead, the hard earth remained mockingly impenetrable.

She could see or believed she could see for a moment, the weird, twisting, hypnotizing unwinding of a standing python, could see it undulate and ripple in the dim flicker of light cast into the darkness below. Her heart began to thud against her chest, and she could feel a sickening drop in the pit of her stomach. She closed her eyes.

The hiss grew louder, closer; she began to tremble. She fancied she could feel scales moving over her.

Then:

“You’re new around here, aren’t you?”

Her eyes flew open. It had been a little-boy’s voice that had spoken just now. There was someone else down here, sharing this particular oubliette. She looked in wonder at the strange, crouched little form that was before her.

He was small, rail-thin, bald; half-starved, but with large, beautiful, magnificent eyes that seemed to shine in the dark.. His hair was misty strands of white; his cheeks were sunken in and the mouth was a thin, brutal slit of rotted teeth. The pale flesh was deeply saturated with filth, and he wore a loin cloth that must have, at one point, been white.

“I’m called Ricky. what’s your name.”

For a moment she was too frightened to answer, but then she managed to stammer out: “I’m C-Cinder. How did you get down here? What is this place. Who are these...things...”

He smiled, a horrible looking expression that put her in mind of some sort of feral animal, amused at the wit displayed in flaying alive a smaller, defenseless creature.

"I've been down here...oh, a long time...You'll have to get use to things down here. It's heaven, you see."

"Heaven?--*Well, it sure as fuck doesn't seem like heaven!*" Cinder blurted, between tears and rage. She didn't want to be close to Ricky, dreaded the thought of actually touching him...but she found that she did, instinctively, seem to inch closer, as did he.

"You have much to learn. This place is, ah, a turning point, if you will... they're doing things here that are going to be important someday. Really important. I know. I use to be one of them myself...but then the Overlord took serious offense to something I did...he took from me...Ah, but you wouldn't understand."

He began to scratch some sore under his arm. Cinder fought back the urge to cry, stifled her useless tears, and pried her fellow captive for information.

"H-how old are you Ricky? You seem awfully young...to...be down here."

He considered.

"I am this many..."

He suddenly held up both hands, and she realized that he was missing three fingers on one , and two on the other.

He began to laugh, an even more unpleasant sound than his speaking voice, which was thin and rusty and sounded like the prying-open of a coffin lid. She stared in disbelief. This boy was as mad as all the rest of them.

Then, as if in confirmation of this thought, his laugh became a sort of barking, coughing exhortation of rage and self-pity, and he put his stumpy hands to his eyes in frustration and rage.

“They’re so mean to me! So very, very mean to me! Curse them! Curse them! Thrice curse and damn them all to hell!”

He was crying out of dry sockets, and, as Cinder stared in disbelief, he seemed to literally *hop* from his sitting place back into the darkness on the other side of the pit. She thought, for a moment, that she could see those beautiful, large, iridescent eyes shine on in the darkness, but then the twin blue orbs faded, and all she could hear was that same, strange, serpent-like slithering, and the sickening hiss, as she struggled to maintain her wits.

Suede had managed, with much sweat and exertion, to finally climb the fence.

She had cut the hell out of herself on *something*, and she had dropped from the top onto the ground and twisted her damn ankle. Oh well. She was here and it was done. She would limp on as best she could.

The back area of Holloway was as riotous as the architecture of the building itself; the overgrown gardens, low fences, twisted walkways, and old tool sheds created a natural obstacle course. This was the least-used and, thus, the best area of the grounds from which to execute a jailbreak. On the west side was the employee parking lot.

She made her way through garden paths, taking in the fragrant odors, not liking the garden one bit. Flowers made her think, always, of funerals. She crept, hid behind corners, played it safe. Jack Martin had taught her, practiced her, when he took her under his wing.

Finally, she made her way to within a few yards of the back porch area, which was screened in and would of

course be locked. She hurried across the lawn, catty-corner to the tennis courts, and then suddenly, unexpectedly, was caught dead in her tracks.

The tennis courts had been outfitted so patients could come out here at night and play, with staff approval. None ever had, but that was the reason for the huge bank of lights overlooking them. Those lights created a wide area of illumination.

And, as she began to hurry across the open field area just before the little-used back entryway, they all came on in a blast of blinding, terrifying whiteness.

Part 3: Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire

Chapter 1

Hell is a place of eternal joy and wonder; there may be a dull moment now and again, but on the whole, even if you're not having fun, they at least force you to look as if you are.

Take for instance the drug addict, whose tolerance of an addictive substance soon proves so infuriating that, eventually, only a larger amount of the substance will suffice to alleviate anxiety and withdrawal. Also, the sexual pervert, who requires greater and greater fixes of pornography and sadism until, verily, he is gluttoned on sensation.

But, we ask, how is it that what once caused such joy can become, after awhile, such a burden? A wonderful tune, for example, when played, ad infinitum will

eventually cause displeasure to the listener. Give it a few hours and he will begin to grit his teeth, and slip a hand over his ears. A few weeks in isolation, with the same musical number being pumped in through an intercom, and he may be seriously considering suicide.

A year, and let's see if he can remember his name anymore.

Another year, and he may forget that the music is playing at all.

We are creatures bound by the world of sensation: we hunger and eat, we touch and taste, we smell and feel--we remember the way that we want to. Old horrors become blanks in our mind; new wonders lose their edge, and recede into the faded fabric of yesterday. And this is the way of the world.

Down, deep below the earth, in a series of abandoned mineshafts, Hell had begun to recreate itself from the tortured, nightmare fabric of man's consciousness. The Marquis De Sade could not have devised a subterranean world so full of the expert manipulation of pain, pleasure, and sensation.

Level upon darkened level contained the cast-off, wandering results of lobotomy and surgery, deformity and mutation, torture and murder. This was the secret world of those who waited their time, and worked, in small steps, toward the Great Work of the Ages. It had always been thus: the Overseer could not now, envision, how it could ever be any different.

Little by little, beings of even more astounding and horrific form had been able to slip through the widening gate, to invade the human host, to bring about the single

greatest mass-sacrifice, and, consequently, the greatest battery of energy that Dark Wave consciousness had ever experienced. They lived here now, their machines burrowing and digging and blasting rock, continually, building the subterranean fortress of the advance army. Human kind, with all of its potential, and all of its *energy*, could be utilized--in fact, had been utilized--since the ancient times of the Forefathers. Now the Overseer, their progeny and their heir, occupied his own human skin suit, kept his own pet soul imprisoned in a hallucinogenic from which he would never let it escape. He had liked the fool immediate; his half-baked attempts at signing away his soul were, for the most part, extremely amusing.

The Overseer and his crew were constantly busy; he (or rather, IT) was determined, against all better judgment, to maintain the same state as he had since the original schism, wherein he separated--rather abruptly, and with no aplomb whatsoever--from Holy Source. Worse yet, when Holy Source had decided it had had more than enough of the raging conflicts between all of these various intelligent personalities, it tried--desperately tried--to reawaken itself to the possibility of union of the One.

That was bad. That was very bad. That could mean the end of everything. Would mean the end of the Overseer, and well, he wasn't about to let *that* happen.

Ah, Human Being was fertile material. What power, what awesome, naked control, these physically-encumbered creatures could possess, if they but took the time to remember, in a real, significant way, what they *really were*.

I've become sentimental or something, he thought to himself, and raised himself from his chair.

It was a throne of his own personal design, cobbled together from heaps of skeleton and leathery skin. He found it relaxing, and as he reclined, often he could sift through the energies and agonies that these old bones had once felt and suffered with.

Ah, this one under my left buttock suffered from...a hernia. This one had muscular dystrophy...this one was a leper, or I'm a purple-assed baboon...aching joint. Gall bladder. Died from asphyxiation. Died from torture when we piled stones on his chest and pulled out his fingernails with red-hot pincers.

Yet, even in the midst of his rapture, there were troubling things. He could test the psychic waters of the world, spin out into the various frequencies and judge for himself the state of things in the world of the intangible and invisible.

Above them, too many souls crying out within the cosmos; lost, nowhere to go, flitting through an eternity of darkness, still believing themselves embodied, or, alternately trapped in the prism of whatever hallucination sufficed. Living nightmares. But in the center of it all, he could hear one lonely, child-like voice crying out. He thought he recognized that presence, but he couldn't be sure. He tried to penetrate the screen it had set up.

No dice. He kept getting the same innocuous images: clouds floating by, sunrise and sunset, a cool lake, a puppy dog.

It made him queasy. Who the hell was that little, worrisome piece of fragmented consciousness fighting his way, and beating a path, back to Godhead? What, pray

tell, if other angry energies began to join him?

And, the Overseer was sure, there was an even greater One, beyond Him, that was worthy of fear. The Root. The First. The One.

Oh, it was the "Sorrows of Satan", all over again, he reflected bitterly. At such moments he would lean back, resting easy on the decaying flesh of his palace throne, and re-live some minor detail from a month or two ago, letting the image transport him backward in time, letting it take over the three-dimensional space he now occupied until, fundamentally, he was an actor simply re-living an important role on the silver screen.

It had been a meeting with Hosty, a Special Agent of the Government of the... *YOO ESS EH*--yes, that was what they called it. He had wondered, in a near state of panic, what he was going to wear for the benefit of the so-good Special Representative, until finally deciding to appear in the form of the classic "Grey" extraterrestrial; he knew that the spy-game types loved that one.

"Hosty" was, it turned out, a rather unexceptional fellow who had very poor, half-formed shielding, and almost no comprehension of the enormity of the beings he was opting to form an alliance with. He was under the assumption that they were all local aliens from Sirius B, or maybe even inner-earth (they were, after all, based underground) , and he had brought with him the usual contingent of hired guns and little, devious minds. The Overseer had been amused for a short time.

Hosty had, among other things, organized military coups in half-a-dozen small island nations, had been the planner behind a string of successful assassinations and

kidnappings, had been liaison between the C.I.A. and the Mafia in the interest of involved in drug-running and arms deals...he had been around the block, so to speak. He was not afraid to get his hands dirty.

The small group of men had been guided down into His world by an adjunct, disguised in the flesh of an Army captain. The Overseer carefully curtailed the visiting experience to meet the Agent's expectations: soldiers and Grey's mucking about, vats of human body parts, futuristic operating tables. It was all a funny little game.

The men, unused to an alien appearance, had all stiffened when first walking into the room...but, the Overseer knew they were hardened men, and he looked, at this present time, just a little but worse than the worst case of congenital deformity that each of them had ever seen. Hosty, briefcase in hand stepped forward and said:

"Greetings on behalf of the President...he wishes me to send you his warmest regards, and to let you know that he regrets that he cannot meet with you personally."

The Overseer considered the tall, oval-faced man in the dark glasses. His mind was high and tight, but not, by any means, a closed subject. He began to scan the man: his thoughts, fears, and memories...

"We see that you are most pleased with the present situation as it has developed... our alliance has brought about a profitable cultural and technological exchange, one that I'm sure will only continue to benefit the both of us."

Hosty eyed him behind his obsidian shades, and the Overseer knew he was somewhere in the middle of

mistrust, repulsion, and outright fear.

He's a tough one...good at hiding his feelings. Very experienced.

“Yes...and the new technology we’ve developed from your own plans will greatly aid in defending our great nation against any outside aggressors...Of course, I’m sure there are still a few surprises in store for us, Overseer.” Pause. “The agreement--our long standing agreement, is still solid. My superiors assure me that as long as we can be mutually beneficial to each other, your crew and yourself have no fear of any *outside intervention* in your affairs here. In turn, we will continue to allow a certain segment of our own population for, for... *your stated purposes*. We understand that nothing comes for free, and we feel that, well, what we are getting in return...is too valuable to let go of very easily...”

Hosty set his briefcase down on the floor, put his hands on his hips, and looked as if he was making himself somewhat more comfortable. His manner was more relaxed; friendlier.

“Now, we know there are a lot, I mean a fucking lot of people up there that would love to get the dibs on you guys, what goes on down here...there have been all kinds of wild rumors floating around for years. Hell, I would love to know all the juicy details for myself, except I don’t have time for that right now...The Working Group is on a tight schedule, and I have to adhere to that. What we are looking for, pure and simple, is this: first, we need your assurance that you will significantly reduce your visibility on the outside...if at all possible, keep the abductions and mutilations to a minimum, for the time being. Remember:

the success of any operation is determined by the level of secrecy that can be kept. Also, we were wondering if you guys had any insight on this whole Middle Eastern question...”

And on and on the fool went. The Overseer was more interested in the past remembrances and misdeeds of Hosty himself, than any information the man might want to “share”, or idiotic suggestions he would make. The Overseer simply went through the motions of this part, the part of *Quazgul*, the Grey; all benevolent wisdom and soft voice and thin, reed-like body. It was a good costume; the true consciousness of this creature was fitted very neatly in the palm of his hand, and all he had to do was make a few gestures to hold the pose.

“...So, you see, we have spread, over the years, enough disinformation to, ah, keep the public guessing...but not everyone is as dumb as all that. What our subliminal messages, food additives, and microwave towers don't take care of, *disinfo* does. It takes up the slack; makes even serious researchers look like fools...”

The Overseer was bored, but he managed to pontificate in rational, extraterrestrial manner. He found himself wishing these sordid fools would leave.

Finally, after another few minutes, he regretted to inform his guests that his attention was required elsewhere. They were shown by his disguised subordinate back out of the maze of subterranean passages, and left at their car, parked in a rural location.

The Overseer let the carefully-chosen facade slip; he loosened his grip on the subatomic structure, and his underground paradise rearranged itself, back to the

manner of his natural liking.

He was reclining again, comfortable in the shape of a vast, tall demonic monk in a cloaked black hood. A character he had picked up somewhere...in maybe another time, or dimension...

Hosty. Hosty had once met a man named Jim Jones...a religious figure. The Overseer brought the memory to life before him in the dark. Jones was a sort of Hitler-like creature, a rabid conman and psychopath who convinced his followers, eight hundred or so people, to drink a fruit drink laced with cyanide. The man wasn't half-bad, thought the Overseer. Very Hitler-like.

Hitler.

Now there had been a fellow that showed *real* promise.

Suede had been knocked unconscious, dragged into the back entryway, over, apparently, the stone steps, and into the inner sanctuary of Holloway House.

She was quick to figure out she had been dragged because of the way her back felt, like someone had used it to try and sand a skiff full of rough-hewn logs. Her clothing was torn in back, and her skin was raw and bleeding. She opened her eyes on darkness, gradually adjusting her vision by the light of the moon streaming through the curtained windows.

She was not sure what room she was in, but it must, conceivably, be a part of the infirmary. She knew she was, at least, laid out on an examining table. Yes, cold dry paper beneath her. Um-hum; sure enough.

She grasped her forehead and moaned in spite of herself. She was going to be pressing one hell of a lawsuit

after this was all over. Nobody had actually said she couldn't be here after working hours. For all anyone knew, she could simply have been coming to fetch something she left at work, and decided to take the back way in...it would seem suspicious, though.

She got up. What the hell was she worrying about lawsuits and all that rot for right now, anyway? She wasn't sure what was going on, and she knew that, properly, she should be well-frightened. She got up, gingerly, and tip-toed, as best she could (her ankle was quite swollen, and now her head and back were killing her to boot) and went to the dim, yellowish shape ahead of her, that she knew must be the door.

She took the cold, round knob in her hand, twisted, discovered, immediately, that it was locked, wondered for a moment what she was going to do, went to the window, pulled up the blinds, found it locked and painted shut, realized she was going to have to wait this out, found her hand had strayed to the waistband of her pants, in the back, and didn't have to reach around to realize that whoever had clocked her had, obviously, thought to get her gun, too.

She sat down on the examination table, and waited. And waited.

Cinder had been clawing, desperately, at the loose dirt of the pit, trying to claw her way up the side, and out. She was filthy now, but she was damned if she was just going to sit and wait until they came for her. She had been fighting for life for months now, ever since she had been found wandering that lost highway road by an Officer

Friendly that had, initially, insisted she was an abused hooker, hopelessly addicted to crack.

Well, she was neither, she was Cinder, and whatever the meaning behind this nightmare, she was determined to live.

Up, and slide back down...up, and slide back down.

The dirt was loose, but she was starting to make some headway, when, suddenly, from below her, a mad, cackling little voice peeped, "What's all the fuss for? I told you, it's heaven in here!"

"It's not fucking heaven, you asshole! Quit saying that!" She creamed, her voice choked with tears of rage. She had, actually, managed to scale, in a very dirty, grasping way, half way up the side of the pit.

There was laughter beneath her, then, in a weird, child-like warble, Ricky said, "Ah, don't be cross with us. You're so mean! Why are you so mean to me? Why are they all so mean to me? Why? Why? WHY?"

Ricky was screaming and crying again, but Cinder ignored him, pulling at the dirt in a mad scrabble for freedom, trying with every last ounce of energy to liberate herself. Her arms felt red-hot with strain, and she was worried, for a moment, she would faint from the exertion.

For some reason, she said, "I-I wasn't trying to be mean to you, Rick--I just want to fucking get free from here! Jesus!"

Suddenly, she looked up to see a pair of strangely beautiful eyes peering over the rim of the great hole at her.

"Why didn't you say so to begin with?"

It was Ricky. For a moment, Cinder almost lost her grip

at the side of the hole, and went tumbling back down in the darkness. He thrust a skinny, dirty, scabbed arm down at her.

“It--it’s not long enough!”

He poked his head up, considered, and then retreated into the gloom for a moment. Cinder could feel her position slipping, had her hand tied around something that amounted to a protruding root, and her legs were just begging to slip from an outcropping of rock, when he suddenly appeared again with a long, tattered, filthy end of something that must have once been a strip of cloth. She grabbed for it with one hand, and he held tight the other end, with a strength she would have never dreamed he could have possessed.

It was slippery, and but she managed to wind it around one hand.

The combination of her terror and his great strength, her scrabbling and his pulling, was, mercifully enough. She managed to scabble over the top of the pit, and, for the first time, stood next to Ricky.

He was small and thin, so pitiful and dirty, she wanted to frantically embrace him for a moment. For that moment, as awful as he was, he was a savior, and she needed saviors now, very badly.

But the weird, animal-like quality of him, his mutated, filthy being, was enough to quell her rush of affection. She realized he was, quite possibly, too mad to realize he had done her a favor.

Has he? Where in the hell am I? How do escape this place?

She might also have asked him how he managed to escape the pit himself, and in such an incredible instant of

time. Since there was no time for such questions, she instead asked: "Ricky, will you help me get out of here? If you will, I'll let you come with me. Whatever you may think, Ricky, this is a long way away from heaven. A long fucking way."

When the door was finally opened and light came pouring in, Suede winced, and could see, for a moment, a very prim-looking, very thin female shape standing in the doorway.

Suddenly, the overhead lights were switched on, and Suede found herself face-to-face with Nurse Rachel.

She had seen Nurse Rachel on a number of occasions, had found her body worth looking at, but knew nothing else about her.

Nurse Rachel, however, was not at all in uniform. She was wearing a black blouse and miniskirt with a strange, red arm-band. The symbol on the armband was black on white against the red, like a Nazi armband, but the insignia itself was some inscrutable runic-thing that she had no idea the meaning behind.

Nurse Rachel had very prominent cheekbones, hair tied behind her in a tight little bun, and a pair of black satin gloves that must have cost a small fortune. She was wearing stiletto heels, fishnets, and, by God, even carrying a riding crop. She was lazily puffing at a cigarette.

"Is it Halloween already? Jesus, I forgot my costume..."

"Shut the fuck up. What were you doing, trying to sneak in after hours?"

Suede thought that the Nurse (if she really was that)

was oddly nonchalant about the whole affair, and said, "A better question would be: do you work in a mental hospital, or belong in one? It's considered highly unprofessional to show up for work dressed in a cheap, b-grade dominatrix outfit. By the way, I intend to sue the hell out of you, this place, and whatever goon you hired to knock me out. I am an employee here still, and all I was doing was--"

"--All you were doing was breaking in unannounced to steal from us. Hell, it's pretty obvious what you were doing, but I guess you may be mentally slower than what we had assumed. We don't worry about legal entanglements around here, Suede. Why the surprise, that's your name, isn't it? And you have the *hots* for one of our patients here. We told you that was a no-no from the day you signed the contract. But this obviously goes deeper. We'll just have to let Father handle it His way."

Suddenly, Nurse Rachel stepped forward, grasped the back of Suede's hair, and violently kissed her on the mouth. Suede, for a moment too stunned to do anything but reciprocate, felt Nurse Rachel's hand reach up and grasp the seat of her jeans. Her nails were long, black, and spike-like. Suede began to knead the flesh beneath Rachel's miniskirt, pulling the fabric upward, sliding her fingers beneath the silky panties and clutching her firm backside in a quivering grasp.

Suede suddenly dug her fingers as hard as she could into Rachel's flesh, causing the woman to scream, draw back, and spit in her face.

Suede sent her reeling across the room, turned, flew out the open door, and nearly missed colliding with a

walking mountain covered, it would seem, in dirty feathers and dried blood.

“You’ll pay for that--*fucking bitch!* Get that fucking bitch! Get that fucking bitch! Hurry!”

The Mountain was carrying some sort of sharp, spiked weapon. Suede dodged one downward swing, nearly lost her balance against the opposite wall, and took off, into the darkened corridor.

She had gotten one quick, fleeting look at the walking mountain.

Jesus, she thought to herself. *It really is Halloween.*

Cinder ran as fast as her legs could carry her into the darkness of the labyrinth. It seemed that at every turn, there was something more to shock and offend her sense of what was real.

The maze of underground passages seemed to be equal parts basement, cavern, prison, crypt, and zoo--ahead of her, scrambling and leading into the darkness, the frail form of Ricky was something more feral, more primitive, than even an insane boy. He seemed to be not, altogether, human.

“Come--this way. Before it is too late. Can’t you hear them?”

Indeed, it seemed as if she could hear a growing reverberation; a cacophony of voice and moans that seemed to lie, like some subtle soundtrack, just beneath the surface of her frenzied breathing. She skidded to a stop, crouching low behind a massive outcrop of stone that seemed to have been worked by some ancient, demented sculptor.

Her fingers played, unconsciously, over the edges of the abutment; she could feel strange cryptograms, weird and hideous tracings, leering and grotesque faces--the carvings seemed to suggest mountains of tumescent flesh, twisted knotted vines, and piles of moldering dead all in the same primitive construct.

Suddenly, the thin, weird voice of Ricky screeched in her ear, causing her to jump.

"They are the Ones--they have slipped, will slip, are slipping through the Open Way. They come to infest this bottom level, to feed off the parasite man and make the world safe for Nightmare and her children...They are the *Dark Wave*. It is total war, now..."

Cinder looked at him, thinking him to be quite mad. But no matter: he seemed, at least, to be on her side. Or so she thought. She decided to play along with his madness, and asked, "So--so *what now*? What do we do now? Why did they put us down here? And how the fuck do we get out? Huh, Ricky? How?"

He rocked back on his skinny filthy legs, and said, "Ah! Me! My! Foe! Fie! How? How? How? Why? Why? Why? There may be no answer! Everything you love will die! Drat me! Curse me! They are all so *cursed mean!*"

He began to pull his scant filthy hair between his fingers and cry. Cinder suddenly clutched him close to herself, and began to weep herself.

"Oh Ricky," she wept. "*You are so fucking crazy...*"

Suede raced down the large central staircase, and the Mountain followed, gibbering in its weird, sickening cackle.

She was a mad dash away from the front entrance when, suddenly, it burst open, and a scrawny, filthy-looking young man ran through, a large knife clasped firmly in one hand, and a length of rope in the other.

“Get that bitch Cousin Darryl! C’mon now! Just like a good old-fashioned coon hunt! We gonna string this one up and skin her alive, boy!” Suede locked eyes with him for one brief moment, realized he was a profoundly psychotic retard, and pivoted running toward the Nurse’s station, leaping over the counter, knocking over a chair, and running through the doorway in the back.

Cousin Darryl and the man that had ran in the front collided, nearly knocking each other off balance, before the great, feather-covered mountain managed to right his immense bulk, and proceeded to follow, his cousin hooting madly behind him. Suede found herself in a series of rooms, one after the other, which opened in on each other in a confusing fashion. She twisted her way through the maze of rooms, opening one door after the other, running into the room, running fast out, searching for a way to safety. And she could hear them, pound after her, making the noise of elephants, certain that they would capture their mouse.

Cinder found she could not stop for long. Always, the sound of scuffling, slithering presences seemed to haunt the dark. She followed Ricky, whom she knew now was as eager to escape as she, through the winding darkness, clinging to him now and again, as one who understood the rules of this strange, sepulchral world better than she ever hoped to.

They had made their way, breathlessly, until they came upon a series of passages that seemed to be laid with ancient brick. Here, there were doorways on either side that lead to small rooms of ill-defined purpose.

Above the doors were engraved symbols that Cinder could not guess the meaning of. Cinder slowed down, casting furtive glances into the darkened doorways, seeing things she would rather have never witnessed in her life.

It was as if all the mad visions of hell had been brought here by some mad artist, bent on increasing the effect of the work through sheer, bloody-minded, overkill. Here was a Boschian world of twisted bodies, bent over wooden cranes, stretched tight on racks, twisted on tables whose specifications had been designed, solely, to elicit the most excruciating, exacting pain from the forms

Suede ducked behind a corner, just in time to avoid being struck by the hooked claws of Cousin Darryl. The razor tips dug a line of claw marks as the mountain pulled his hand back. Suede, only a step ahead, ducked into a room that seemed no bigger than a closet, and slammed the door behind.

She quickly twisted the small, hook-shaped silver lock. It might hold him off for a few moments.

In front of her, a very fat, nude woman, whom she had seen once before, in the guise of Nurse Maddox. Now, she was stripped naked, each immense roll of flesh threatening to overwhelm the eye. Around her neck was a necklace affair adorned with severed animal heads. On the floor, just below her ponderous shadow, was the slick,

wet remains of a butchered dog. From the look of it, Nurse Maddox was using the blood and viscera of the dead beast to slick her thighs.

“And just where do you think you’re going, missy?” Nurse Maddox screamed, her eyes twin embers of burning wrath. Suede stood for a moment, too dumbfounded to speak. Then, she heard the clawing at the door, and the sound of feet stamping the wooden frame.

The gross, obese woman twisted one fat, jeweled finger into her face. The nail was painted black. Suede didn’t know whether to laugh or scream.

“You’ll never leave here alive. We like you, the pretty ones. Well, everyone likes the pretty ones, correct? Correct? But when the Dark Wave have finished with you, you won’t be so pretty anymore. Not, at least, by any normal standards...” She trailed off, hefted her enormous, sagging breasts with her small hands, and sent the severed heads bouncing against her marshmallow flesh.

“Aren’t I beautiful?”

Suede suddenly punched her, as hard and quickly as she could manage, directly in the center of her face, and watched, with not a little amazement, as the massive body began to tumble downward. Behind her, the doorframe began to crack under the massive kicking thrusts of Cousin Darryl, and she could hear his hooked claws dig into the wood. She decided, for a moment, that she most probably was dreaming.

The fat woman collapsed in a billowing heap of gibbering flesh. Suede was too frightened to move near

her for a moment. It was stunning. *Jesus*, she thought, *I didn't hit her that hard.*

There was a window, a small window near the ceiling. Suede bounded across the floor, within an inch of the lying body, and got one foot onto the top of a small metal bookcase before she felt a vice-like grip bear down upon one of her ankles. She screamed in intense agony, and turned.

What she saw then would stay with her for the rest of her life.

A snake-like thing had attached itself to her leg, coiled around her shoe like a dripping python, and was pulling her backward. This snake had come from the mouth of the fat woman, Nurse Maddox, as her chalk white blubber began to melt away from the bones and drip, in semi-liquid blobs, across the linoleum.

Suddenly, a torrent of yellow vomit began to gush from the curling lips of the woman, as the sickening tentacle kept its hold on her. She turned, holding onto the edge of the bookcase, and knocking it over beneath her as he fought. The torrent of yellow vomit splattered her jeans, burning into her skin like some mysterious acid, and Suede realized, for the first time tonight, that she was going to, most probably die.

A sickening odor of decay, of death and burning flesh and electrical fire, seemed to fill the room. Suede fought against the grip of the writhing tentacle, finally, in desperation, digging her fingers into the moist, squishy matter of it, until it burst, like some jellified tumor, leaving bits of caustic gore to soak into her fingers.

Suddenly, as the wooden door crashed open, revealing

the monstrous form of the feather-clad maniac as he charged in for the kill, the writhing tentacle, still spurting gristle from its wounded side, seemed to retract into the gaping, dead mouth. Suede fought to regain her feet, but then, suddenly, she could no longer move, for she beheld a sight so utterly beyond the bounds of human belief, that she was captured in wonder by the grotesqueness of the nightmare image that erupted before her.

The head of Nurse Maddox split, like some rotten fruit, into two halves. And out of the glistening, wet cavity of her brain, thick, hairy extremities seemed to thrust outward, and a hideous yellow approximation of a spider crawled its way from out of the blubber where it was borne.

Cinder suddenly felt the small, bony, filthy hand of Ricky reach out and grasp her own.

“No time to linger now! Come on!”

She started forward with him, and the two ran down the length of the hall, turned the corner, and all that Cinder could think of now, with every step was, *I'm dead and this is Hell...I'm dead and this is Hell...I'm dead and this is Hell...*

Suddenly, Ricky stopped stone cold in his tracks. Cinder looked ahead in the darkness. Huge, hooded shapes loomed before them. She knew then, that it really was the end.

Chapter 2

Cinder rolled her eyes open and looked as the sun began to drift through the slightly-parted filmy white curtain. She sat up in bed, felt her forehead in the receding gloom, and groaned. *Oh my god, she thought, I have never had a fucking dream like that before.*

She slid to the side of the bed, hugged herself; shivered. The world still hadn't come back to the same crystal-clarity which reinforces for us, the whole of humanity, the feeling that we are now awake, in reality, the physical world. She wanted a cigarette very badly, and wasn't sure she had any left. What time was it? How long had she been asleep?

She got up from the bed slowly, her mind still abuzz and aflutter with the tenuous grasp of dream imagery. It had been horrible. She had been kidnapped, her family killed by maniacs. She had been imprisoned in a mental home. But it was far worse than just that, she knew. There had been monsters there--hideous things--vile and grotesque abstractions dripping with hideous grue. Also, she had, apparently, been a *lesbian*.

She was dizzy as she walked across the carpet of her bedroom. But she was thankful, as anyone who manages to escape, unscathed from the kingdom of nightmares is, when, finally, they are able to escape from the clutches of their respective torments.

But here she was, amidst the familiar, comforting things that she knew to be the truth of her life: her canopy bed, with pink sheets, her teddy bears and stuffed animals, her make-up mirror and rock music posters. John Lennon watched over her now, his wise mellow eyes hidden behind little round, rimless glasses. He shared

wall space with a black and white poster of an electronic musician who extolled the twin virtues of war and Social Darwinism. She crept to the closet door, thrust her hand inside, got her robe, and began to tiptoe out onto the upstairs landing.

The house was quiet, dim; the sunset painted orange strokes across the downstairs walls, making the downstairs living room into a patchwork of shadow and light to which Cinder fought to adjust her vision as she went down the stairs slowly. Where was Julia and Daddy? Had they taken Bonny out. Or something? She went into the kitchen, looked around, found some cigarettes Julia had stowed away in the cupboard, reached into the fridge, took out a cola, popped the tab, sat down, lit up, got back up, rooted around for an ashtray, and held her head in her hand, smoking.

She was disoriented, and she had no idea why. Dream images were still playing around her consciousness. The world of waking life seemed to her, right now, to teeter, dangerously close, to the world of fantasy.

She heard some rumbling upstairs, realized Julia must, at least, be home, and quickly stubbed the cigarette out, dousing the ashtray with water and setting it back on the counter. She heard Julia come downstairs, heard her huff a little, turn on the stereo to some quiet music...Was she getting ready to go out?

Suddenly, the kitchen door swung in, and Julia entered, saw Cinder sitting there, seemed faintly surprised, and then reached up absent-mindedly to adjust an earring.

"Hey Cin," she said, faintly. Cinder could hear a note of apprehension in her voice.

"Hey," she returned, glumly. She eyed Julia warily, wondering where the hell she was going.

"Y--your father is working late tonight...Bobby is with the special sitter...and I, uh, am going out with some friends. Can you fend for yourself tonight?"

Cinder nodded. She didn't think Julia was dressed so elegantly for a date with "friends". She looked like she was going to be the main attraction at an all-star slut-a-thon. Bitch.

"You're dressed, ah...awful nice."

"Thanks."

Julia rooted around in the cabinet, found the cigarettes that Cinder had just been smoking, said, "I see you've been helping yourself to my smokes, huh Cin? You know what I always tell you: ' If you quit while you can--'"

" '--I'll be quitting *when* I can.' I know."

Cinder finished Julia's words as the woman nervously flitted about the kitchen, too timid, still, to make her exit until she could think of a way to make it seem smooth, flawless; to make it seamless in Cinder's mind.

"So is it your boss you're fucking? Or somebody else?"

Cinder could see Julia's back go stuff, as her head popped up. She turned, her jaws tight and stiff, and her eyes shooting sparks of hatred and indignation.

"YOU" she said, in an icy, rigid voice, but with perfect, practiced control, " are getting to be too big for your britches young lady. Too fucking big...You're not too big, though, to be grounded for a little while. Or a long while, for that matter."

Cinder breathed in heavily, stood up, said, " What the hell would you ground me for, Julia? For being loyal to

my father, when I see that, apparently, his wife has, ah, *an engagement* for the evening...what am I supposed to do, just pretend you're not what we both know you are? A fucking whore--"

Cinder felt the cold, raspy flesh of Julia's bony hand smack against her cheek, and felt the sting crackling up her jaw and into her forehead. Her skin was throbbing. Immediately, she reared back her own hand and slapped Julia's skinny, high cheek-boned face as hard as she could.

"You fucking bitch!"

"You fucking brat!"

Cinder was pulled down to the floor, rolling on the linoleum. Julia jumped on her. She was a skinny, tough bitch, was Julia, and she had had more than enough fat lip from Cinder for the time being. The two struggled, rolling around on the kitchen floor in a heated, profanity-filled catfight.

"You better fucking apologize for that, you little brat! You little bitch! Bill spoiled you rotten. I told him we should have--*AHH!*"

Cinder grabbed a handful of hair, and Julia struck out with her bunched fist. Her frail body was wring and wet with sweat, and she gasped for air as Cinder managed to turn her on her skinny, heaving back, and hold her down with both hands.

"If we keep this up, we'll either be fighting or..."

"Or fucking?"

Julia's voice rang out icily in the cold, dark chasm that Cinder had fallen into. Suddenly, she felt as if she were lying in some dark, great hall, holding bundles of brittle

leaves in her hand, brushing them away as they blew past.

“Hey! Hey, you...wake the hell up!

Cinder jumped. She was sitting up. There was a very worried, fortyish-looking woman standing in front of her, holding some sort of spiral-bound manual. She looked around blearily. She was in school.

“You fell asleep, *man*...”

The black boy that had nudged her arm looked like he was somewhere between concern and good-natured mockery. The teacher (was it Grabnitz? She thought that Mrs. Grabnitz had passed away last summer.) looked like she might either laugh or scorn...she did neither, but instead asked.

“Cin...Cin, are you feeling okay?”

She rubbed her eyes, looked around her. She felt the dim sense of something being infinitely wrong, out of place, but she brushed the thought aside easily, and said, groggily:

“Yeah...sure, everything is fine. Just fell asleep, is all.”

The probable Mrs. Grabnitz pursed her withered lips, puckered her face, and retorted, “Well, try and see if you can make it for the rest of class, Cin. This is very important material we’re covering here...it will be on the *final exam. In a week.* Hm?”

Cinder tried hard to remember, exactly, the particulars concerning the Battle of Antietam.

She walked through the bustling high school halls in a daze, still lost in the vast thoroughfare of her own

dreaming mind. She crept along the halls, looking at faces she half-remembered from years of nodding acquaintance: Becky Margraves, who had once stolen her boyfriend, Pete Van Horne, whom she had had a horrible, unfulfilled crush on for awhile, while in junior high... she barely realized where she was going, but instead every foot fall seemed to be dragging her out the door, and into the streets.

School buses line the road, kids gabbed in little knots here and there; nerds dreamed hot dreams and stole terrified glances at cheerleaders they would never cuddle with except in the fevered recesses of their most forbidden dreams. She was oblivious to it all. The afternoon sun was bright, going to dim. She looked up at the flagpole and realized that America was still America.

She walked down the sidewalk. Someone spoke to her, she turned, and she realized that they had really spoken to someone else. She hefted her book bag, breathed in deeply, and felt like the world might give out from under her at any moment.

She trudged through the neighborhoods, houses mostly gone to seed, sporting cars in the driveway that looked as if they were held together with rust. Hadn't she driven to school today? She couldn't remember. She couldn't, really, get any kind of a grip on herself.

It was several blocks of aimless wandering later when a truck pulled up beside her, an old red pickup with some sort of ladder rig in the back.

"Hey. Hey girl, you need a ride?"

Cinder looked up. A woman with chin-length black hair and handsome face had pulled up beside her, and

rested one massive forearm on the rolled down window, steering with the other hand.

Cinder stopped, looked around, and before she knew it, said, "Yes...that would be great."

Cinder slipped in the passenger side door, warily. The woman looked safe enough, but she had always been taught never to accept rides from strangers. But, for some reason, today the normal rules didn't seem to apply.

"My name's Cinder."

"I'm Suede. Suede O'Donnell. Where do you live at Cinder?"

For a moment, Cinder wasn't precisely sure. Her head still seemed to be full of sand.

"Oh...uh, Shady Acres."

"Nice," the woman said, a little amusedly "Do you usually walk all the way back and forth to school from there?"

Cinder laughed a little, pulled her hair back with one hand, and could feel the woman's eyes play over her face.

"No. Not usually."

The woman snorted, and said, "I mean, Jesus, that is along, fucking way. You're lucky I decided to stop."

Then:

"What? Get in an argument with your boyfriend or something? Is that why you're walking?"

Pause

"I mean, hell, it's not any of my business. I mean, I'm just a natural snoop okay?" The woman shrugged her shoulders,

"I don't usually stop and ask wayward girls if they need a lift, ya understand, its just that, well, you looked

sort of lost, I guess.”

Cinder leaned against the windshield, looking at as the houses and street signs whizzed by in a blur. She said: “No...it’s okay. I guess I just wasn’t feeling that well.”

Silence.

Cinder turned and looked at the woman. She actually wasn’t quite as old as what she had first thought. And darn cheery to be with, too. She felt herself brighten a little.

“In fact, I don’t have a boyfriend at all...I mean, it’s just that men are so hard to understand...ya’ know?”

The woman looked perplexed for a moment, then said, “Yeah...men. They’re all like that. I, uh, I totally see where you’re coming from with that, Cin. I mean, all most guys want is *ahem*...well, I think you, *by this time*...”

Both women started to spontaneously laugh. Cinder could feel her spirits begin to lift.

Suede pulled up into the driveway of Cinder’s home, said, “Gorgeous house”, and looked indecisive for a moment.

“Thank you.”

“Well...here you are.”

“Here I am.”

“And I suppose...hey, what kind of food do you like?”

Cinder was silent for a moment, and then smiling said, “Thai.”

The woman looked indecisive again for a fleeting moment, revved her engine, and then turned again as Cinder was getting out, and asked,

“Hey Cin, how old are you?”

“Eighteen. Why?”

Silence.

“Because I sure as hell would hate to have to try and beat a nasty rap of statutory rape. As the song goes. Maybe you haven’t heard it?”

Silence. Cinder could feel herself blush. She stopped with one leg outside on the pavement, and one butt cheek still on the seat.

“You, ah, you want to go get some Thai food with me sometime?”

“Sure.”

Pause.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Here, lemme give you my number. Cinder opened her book bag, thrust her hand inside for the battered school notebook, and ripped out a half a page of paper. The women busily exchanged numbers. Suede looked both exhilarated and a little guilty all at the same time.

“Hey, Suede, by the way: how old are you?”

“Old enough. Give me a call. We’ll do lunch.”

Cinder waved by, her heart hammering a little, and her adrenalin suddenly coursing. She stopped on the porch, turned, and waved as Suede backed out, cranked the radio up to ear-splitting decibels, and zoomed away into the late afternoon.

Cinder turned put her key in the door, turned the knob, opened it and immediately her spirits sank into the pit of her stomach. There were no lights on, and the dimness of twilight seemed to coalesce here in the confines of her familiar old living room, into inky pools and dips of

blackness. She could feel the temperature drop, perceptibly, several degrees. She suddenly felt fear. Something was wrong.

She walked inside, called out, "Julia? Hello? Anybody here?"

She hadn't thought to look in the garage to see if the red car was there...Daddy always took the other one to the office with him, and *he* was probably working late. Where the hell was Julia? Cinder suddenly remembered her dream.

"Hello?"

She could feel the same lost, empty feeling grip the pit of her stomach again. She struggled to remember if they had told her she might be coming home to an empty house tonight. She found she could remember next to nothing concerning the early part of the day. She suddenly felt like her head was full of fog, again...

Her voice took on a tremulous quality. She called out for an answer again, and received only the pale echo of her own downtrodden voice. Then, suddenly:

"Cinder...I'm here, Cin."

Daddy was upstairs. Why hadn't he come down when he heard her come through the front door?

"Daddy! Oh, thank god, I was wondering where everyone was at."

She suddenly saw a go on in the hall upstairs, and she went up quickly.

"Da--"

Bill was sitting on his bed upstairs, with a book of family photos spread out on his lap. He barely picked up his head to look at her as she entered the room.

“Hey Punky,” he said. Cinder went to him. Put her arms around him, began sobbing.

He looked like he had aged a hundred years since she had last seen him His eyes seemed yellow, misty, and his skin looked old and dry and his hairline looked as if it had receded even further back from his scalp. She kissed him savagely, asked, ‘W-what’s wrong, D-Daddy?’”

He held her close to him, looked down at his family album, and said, sadly, ‘So many memories...Punky. Do you remember when you were a little girl, how you wanted me to get you a pony, so badly? Do you remember? Do you remember your first haircut? Your baby teeth falling out? Do you remember drinking hot chocolate on cold evenings, snuggled up together?’”

She began to really bawl now. She could feel the sheer heaviness of his thoughts weigh down upon her with killing, intense grief.

“Yes, D-D-D-Daddy! *I remember!*”

“You know Punky, you have to enjoy life while you can...make every single minute count, as if it were you last minute on earth...because, Punky, the good times, they don’t last forever. One day, it’s all over, and the memories are all that remain...” He turned to her.

“I know its been hard for you to accept your stepmother...and, maybe, that’s the way it should be. When your mother died, a part of me died as well. I loved your mother more than anything else in the world, and she loved me and you and Bobby so much...I want to tell you, I don’t blame you a bit for what happened. It’s just one of those things. And now, Bobby is gone, and so is Julia...and all we have left, like a bunch of faded pictures,

or a bunch of old dead leaves in the fall, are our memories...Do you understand, Punky?"

Tears streamed down her face as she sat beside him on the bed. She clutched him tight to her, surprised, suddenly, at how weak he felt, how frail; it was as if every bit of life was being drained out of him as they wept together in the stifling dark of that bedroom.

"Oh Daddy, I l-l-love..."

"I love you to, Punky. But not even love can stop the ticking of the clocks..."

He rose suddenly, and she saw him wander to the bedroom door, his gait slow and ponderous. She rose suddenly, went to him, implored, "*Daddy...D-Daddy, whatever it is, it will be okay...*" She sobbed, reaching out to pull him toward her. He looked back at her gravely, his eyes lost; defeated.

Suddenly he began to melt into the blackness of the doorway, dissolve like smoke. One step, and he was gone. Cinder rushed out into the hall, but he had already disappeared, and she was alone, in the dark, same as always.

Chapter 3

She had come back to consciousness, and decided that she was still dreaming.

It was vast web in which she found herself captured, bound in sticky bonds that wrapped her like some strange, modern mummy. She cast her eyes about her in a frenzy of fear. Several wriggling lumps told her she would share her fate with others.

Beneath her, in the circle of orange glow cast by various mounted torches and fires, Cinder could make out the shuffling figures of hooded people. Beings. Strange things that slithered and crept; great tall, white freaks with legs like stilts moved about in shimmering, rag-like gowns. Their heads were little more than ugly, misshapen lumps. The world had opened up and spat out the denizens from the kingdom of nightmares.

She struggled to free herself, but every tiny perceptible movement seemed to strengthen the grip of the suffocating sticky strands that adhered to her flesh. She quit in exhaustion, letting her head fall limp onto her breast, her hair covering her falling over her forehead and hiding the visions of madness that gathered below.

A great altar had been erected upon a massive pile of bones and ash, and robed people holding torches. Below her, they had begun the chant that would open the portal between the worlds, and let in the alien trash beyond the Seven Fold Gate--beings of wondrous and indescribable grotesque beauty. They would come, drawn by the energy of the living, and the Devil and His children would rule the world again, as they had in days of old.

Cinder recognized the voice of the robed, horned priest who held court below her, amidst his devoted coven of human and semi-human monsters. It was Dr. Elmer.

He raised his hands, one holding a twisted sword shaped like a tongue of fire, and intoned, " Oh great wanderers of the Outer Spheres, we beseech thee this night, in the name of all that is unholy, appear! Move, be friendly unto us, your servants, so mote it be!"

"So mote it be!" intoned the robed followers, as Dr.

Elmer, the High Priest crept to the altar, murmuring in a language Cinder did not understand.

Upon the altar he placed the sword, and removed a heavy silver chalice, which he held to his lips and drank from, before passing to the rest of his followers. Cinder could tell that the coven was made up of many of the people she had known as “staff” at Holloway House. Suddenly, from some unseen system of speakers, a deep, sonorous purr of organ music seemed to bellow forth, mixed with wild harmonies of flute and beating of drum. The High Priest turned, and seemed, for the first time, to notice the tall, strange forms that were, quietly, assembling at the edges of the torchlight.

‘Come! Come!’ He cried, holding up his arms as if to embrace the freakish things in an all-encompassing grasp. “Come, to rule and reign once more! *Ave Satanis! The Air has won!*”

A shuffling, flapping, slithering, shrieking cacophony began to emanate from all corners of the great, cavernous ritual chamber, as spectral shapes began to appear and coalesce into a series of ever-baffling and monstrous abnormalities, just hidden from sight. Cinder trembled, feeling the great web into which she had been thrust tighten as if the very strands of web themselves were alive and imbued with some malignant and hateful spirit. She felt her thoughts begin to shatter like glass bulbs.

The strange chanting grew louder, and Cinder could see phantasmal mists flutter around her form. The mist would, from moment to moment, begin to shift into the pattern of a horrifying, screaming face, before dissolving again into a billowing, nightmare current.

Below her, the mad cult droned into ecstasy, their macabre chants strange uttering rising to an operatic crescendo with the music, as a veritable parade of hideous oddities began to assemble in the chamber: vast living globules of bizarre, geometrical form, mad writhing octopi that slithered and crept from the foul nether regions beyond cosmic space, skinless voyagers whose inner organs adorned their bodies with vital tubes held in place by pins and hooks and stitches and wire...it was an assembly of the damned and demented. Not even an Hieronymous Bosch could have conceived of so macabre and gorgeous a spectacle.

The dust began to blow from the ground, and in the darkness before her, above the ritual chamber, somewhere in the center of the dark ceiling of this accursed cavern, the swirling mists began to form themselves into a shifting, prismatic tunnel of colored light, and a strange, howling wind, marked by the muttering and babblings of countless millions of invisible visitors who sought the bosom of pain and pleasure in the world that belonged to man.

“COME!” Dr. Elmer exalted, and then turned, yelling to his understudy, “Zeena! Fetch The Mountain...Have him bring forth our sacrifice...”

The hooded Zeena darted into the darkness behind the altar, and opened a hidden door. After a few moments, the great walking mountain joined the others, dragging a flailing, familiar female shape by a rope rapped around her hands.

Suede had come back to consciousness while being

carried upon the reeking back of the walking, feather-covered freak. She instantly began to kick and claw, pounding his back and pulling away globs of greasy and feathers, filthy strings of his rotting clothing, and what must have been fungous, encrusted skin.

She kicked and yelled savagely, eliciting only a few whooping grunts from her captor, who had taken her into the strange ritual room where, once, Mrs. Holloway had held sway. Then, through a secret entrance into the subterranean chambers that stretched beneath Holloway and deep into the sordid dwellings of the earth.

She hammered him mercilessly with her arms and legs, perched atop his massive shoulder like a bundle of straw. She began to thrash madly, trying to break free from the iron band of his arm as it held her in place.

“You fucking motherfucking freak! You’d better let me go or so help me I’ll--Ahhh!”

A slicing pain shot up the back of her leg, and she realized that the freak had reached up and cut her with one of the twisted metal claws that’s served him in place of his misshapen lumps of hands.

She was thrown down unto a pile of refuse, and the great mountain of a being disappeared into the darkness. She bent to examine her leg, pulled back a hand slicked with blood, and then bolted upward and back, as she suddenly realized that she had been laid down on a pile of ash and bone.

“Help!” She suddenly cried, in mad frustration. “Somebody, for the love of God! Please--”

“He won’t do anything to help you, dear. Not now.”

Suede spun around, could just make out the hooded

shape of blond, attractive woman in the darkness.

"I'm Zeena, Priestess of *He Who Cannot Be Named*. Welcome."

"F-fuck you! What...are you going to do to me?"

The woman turned, placed her hands on her hips in satisfaction, and seemed to consider a distant rumbling that seemed to be getting louder with each moment.

She turned again, her pale skin almost luminescent in the darkness.

"Not us. Wait."

A moment later, forms emerged from the darkness, and bound her more quickly than she ever thought would have been possible. She was dragged then, by the great hulking freak, out a narrow door, and into the mouth of madness.

Chapter 4

The Overseer was feeling pretty good.

In fact, wonderful. An ecstasy beyond comparison. Now, it was time, and oblivion would begin. His kind would issue forth, from the dark recesses of the Seven Fold Gate, and Man would cease to be the master of this Earth domain. It would bridge the gap between the divided nature of consciousness--to bring the light and darkness together; to tie them like the ends of a divine ribbon, so that they might never be torn asunder again. This would be the culmination of his eons of suffering endeavor, from one side of the Astral Dreamscape to another.

He suddenly found himself standing atop the altar made of bone, in the ritual chamber that these pesky, tiny

fools that worshipped him had constructed here, in this abysmal cavernous dwelling that he called home. Below him, a vessel that considered itself worthy enough to masquerade as his servant was busily invoking all the energies he could muster, maximizing the moment of his oblivion. The Overseer could grok it even as he stood there.

His insects fell to their knees in adulation. Around them, his brethren from the lower depths paraded on living feet; twisted and garish and grotesque and horrifying and beautiful, they were feeling their way back to physical existence; back to the flesh.

Below, chained like some slave off a cargo ship, the blood sacrifice groveled at the altar in terror. In a moment, they would cut her throat, and commence an orgy in her blood, to satiate him. Repulsive. The thought of humans copulating was enough to make him queasy.

“Oh my Lord! I beseech thee this night of all nights, to--
AHHH!”

The Overseer reached down from the altar with one immense claw and ripped the head off of Dr. Elmer. It detached from the neck with a sucking pop, and sprayed blood in a torrent that washed the clean white bone of the altar red.

Pandemonium erupted, as, one by one, the other worshippers were seized in massive claws, gripped by writhing tentacles, ripped clean of their flesh, and devoured by soldiers of madness whose heads were somewhere between that of feral dogs and giant insects. The Overseer began to laugh, really, truly laugh, with the mirth of a child, as he felt himself slip the wave pattern

that kept him solidly in his present form, and changed it consciously to one that accommodated him much more. His massive frame folded, hairy legs ripped themselves clean from his gibbering flesh, and he felt the pleasure of slowly metamorphosing into the immense, arachnid form that was to his greatest liking. And there was *such* a lovely web to climb.

Suede crawled through the dust and blood, finally getting to her feet, and dodging through the mass of twisting macabre figures toward the edges of the web on the wall. Up there, just a few feet, she could see several lumpy forms that had been wrapped into the webs. All were dead, she knew, save for one, whose face she could see in the flickering glare of torchlight. That form still moved, faintly, writhed in muffled agony, and she meant to free it.

She grabbed a torch that had fallen in the melee, ran with it toward the edge of the web, and looked up. Above, just beyond her reach, was Cinder. She began to rip at the strands, felt them wrap themselves, like living snakes, around her fingers, and clench.

She put the torch to the strands and heard a piercing wail. They began to recede in pain, and she burned them away.

Goddamn it, goddamn it, I'm going to live through this to tell about it. And so are you!

She began to burn and claw at the sickening strands, and yet they seemed to multiply, to seek her form; they shot out and grasped her clothing and hair. She was in a mad fight against an inhuman enemy.

Behind her the screams began to die away, as the last of the worshippers were pulled apart, hacked apart, tortured, skinned, and mutilated for the amusement of the monstrous chorus of celebrants that were steadily filling this accursed place. Suede was now captured in a grasping maw of the white, writhing strands, began to scream, and kick.

The Overseer crept from his place, and began to gorge himself on the blood and terror that were at his feet. His brethren parted in respect. Here was the one that had liberated them from bondage; now, there would be only nightmares, and never daydreams. Now, the world would quake in the agony of her most grotesque fears and delirious torments. This was their finest hour.

Suede had dropped the torch; it burned miserably at her feet as she clawed and kicked and screamed. It began to pull her up, inching her upward, to become another of the mummified flies' that were, apparently, its nourishment. She thrust her head backward in panic; the world had slowed down into a dizzying panorama of images.

A gigantic--an enormous--spider was creeping toward her. A creature so big it defied the senses. Behind it, amid the gore and carnage, all the demons of hell stood in rapt wonder, holding their chains and pincers, and all the instruments of their arcane craft of punishment in readiness.

"Out! Out demon, out!"

A crystal clear voice seemed to break the mad cacophony of utterances like the clear tolling of a bell. Suddenly, the spider retreated, skittered its massive bulk

around in an almost comic mockery of human surprise, and watched as its legions parted, letting the one who had spoke forth stand before the Master.

“ You! *Ze’blod Na’ggakai T’aluulu!*”

Galls stood in the middle of the blood-soaked floor, his finger held up accusingly.

A gurgling, sepulchral voice erupted from the Spider:

“You...This is no business of yours, Galls...The time is late. The Clocks have stopped. We...rule...*again...*”

The Overseer crept forward, and Galls held up one ancient, gnarled finger in reproach.

“Do not test my authority. Of all the denizens of the Outer Planes, you should know that best, my friend.”

The Overseer considered.

“ Yes. We were friends once. Now, it is a pity, situations being what they are, we must forgo our mutual admiration and play on opposite sides of the game. I find it helps to be philosophical about these things.”

“Yes. You may have a point there...” Galls scratched his chin in a repose for a moment, and then flew forward with a valkyrie screech, grasping the giant spider in his arms.

Suddenly, the devils erupted into a riot of panic, and Suede felt the ropy bonds that squeezed her suddenly retract in seeming terror. Dry husks--drained and withered bodies--fell around her. And Cinder, who had been just inched from her grasp, fell on top of her head, knocking her into the dirt.

She rolled out from under the dead weight of the girl, ferociously pulling off the dead strands of web and flinging them aside, and put her hand on Cinder’s chest.

She didn't know for a moment whether or not the girl still lived, but she had no time to wonder. She scooped her up in harms, carrying her burden easily, and began to run through the riot of shifting forms.

Winged beasts swooped over her head; rioting gargoyles ran in every direction, screeching in wonder and terror, fearing that the jig might well be up. Suede ran headlong into the darkness, not daring to look back at the horrid scene she had left behind.

She could hear the thump of footfalls though, just behind her.

It ran with the frenzy of a wounded animal. The Mountain, still covered in its cloak of shit and feathers and blood and death, had come alive like a stampeding elephant, trailing gabbled, screaming nonsense in its wake.

Suede plunged into the dark recesses of the labyrinthine corridors; she still held the body of Cinder in her arms, and her heart and fear were pumping wildly through veins that felt as if they pumped solid adrenalin. She felt the breath in her lungs grow hot through exertion; felt her chest heave with fear and terror.

Behind her, it lunged, a gigantic mad beast, as hell bent on destruction as if it had been a predator tracking its food through a jungle. One swing of its mighty steel claws sent spark shooting from the rough stone walls of the corridors. She was within striking distance.

She stumbled along in front of the mountain, her knees hitting the floor in mod-stride, and she, somehow, managing to right herself and keep going. The fear inside

of her drove her onward, with Cinder in her arms, looking for some glimmer of light that might lead to an escape.

Its brain was exploding in its filthy, lice-infested head.

The blood-urge was possessing it, and these two had far-outlived their usefulness as playthings. No, it reckoned it was time to take their blood. It felt the need for vengeance.

It turned for a moment, and cast it's glance backward. Behind it, in the ritual chamber, all hell was breaking loose. It could hear the screams and shrieks, the pounding of feet, and the slithering of tentacles, and the clomp of hooves. But what did it matter to it? Those Big Ones were about their petty business, and so was It. It cast its gaze forward into the darkness. Where had the pretty one run to, with her armful of fresh meat and her mouth full of screams and foul words? It sniffed the air, but all that It could smell was itself.

This body it wore had once been a great, gross oaf of a backward farm boy. Now, it was all predator. Now, it belonged to the Dark Wave. It crouched for a moment, trying to glean a murmur of breathing.

Suede ran madly, her heart beating wildly in her chest, her arms about to give. Finally, she collapsed against the inside of a jutting stone arch. Cinder was still limp in her arms.

Suede checked her pulse, and then Cinder's. The girl, for all she knew, may be in some sort of shock-induced coma. She leaned back against the rough stone wall,

trying to control the gasping of her breath.

She had to shut out the insane, unbelievable things she had witnessed tonight...mustn't, in fact, think about them, until she found both of them the hell out of this house of madness. She stifled the choking phlegm in her lungs, and crouched low to the ground, spied around the corner, looking for their pursuer.

The cold, isolated darkness, had perceptibly began to lift. A strange, blue mist seemed to be building; a luminescent bath of illumination that was slowly beginning to brighten the corridors, until the rough details of their surfaces could be seen clearly.

It was a strange tapestry of carvings, that crawled across the wall like an epic; beasts indescribable and monstrous, with many appendages and heads, and tall, alien forms that stood heroic, and vast heavenly boats that ascended to other worlds, and hieroglyphic markings the meanings of which she could not begin to guess.

Then she saw something begin to form in the air. And she screamed as she never had before in her entire life.

Within the ritual chamber, amidst the splashes of gore, and the refuse of macabre butchery, The Overseer felt sure that he had, finally, wrestled victory from the jaws of defeat.

Galls was bound in a coil of sucking webs that seemed to be draining him dry of every last fragment of his existence. He had grown to over ten feet tall in the first few moments, but, even as he wrestled the Overseer, pulling apart his legs and burning his fists in the pulpy flesh of his back, web after web was shot at him until, at

last, he was on the verge of a mortal death.

The ritual chamber was now a vast madness of webbings; creatures that had not departed beyond these walls when the initial struggle had commenced, were now caught like tiny insects in the killing strands. Many of them hung suspended from ever-increasing strands, their energy drained, inadvertently, by The Overseer, who nonetheless was damn happy to have the extra juice.

Galls had started to rot where he hung; his flesh grew old, withered; it began to flake away from his face. His battle was over, thought The Overseer, who told him, in his most polite, and patient appellation, that further struggle was useless.

Galls knew he would die here. The idea didn't bother him. He needed a little time away from his duties.

"Mr. Galls, we do have to quit meeting under such difficult circumstances. One of these days, let's hope, we can afford to be more cordial to each other."

Galls felt the life drain from him; felt the skin of his lips wither and crumble, but managed, " Yes, it is a shame, old boy. But, however, you seem to be suffering under the delusion that, somehow, you've defeated me."

The Overseer climbed his way on top of Galls head, squatted, and shot forth another volley of webs. He felt, suddenly, wary.

"Haven't I, though? I mean, look around you, old boy. The Gate has swung wide, and you haven't managed to stop even one of our brethren from coming forth and escaping into the night...Even now, they begin to fill this world of men and dreams, to turn it into a world of Our Kind...a world of eternal darkness, and beautiful,

unending nightmare. Can't you see what I have accomplished, in this short space of time? Old fool, you should bow before me, and thank me."

The bone-thin body beneath him began to convulse, and the reply was stopped short for a moment by a hacking cough. Galls flesh was melting away from his skull like wax.

He smiled; a hideous, deaths-head grin. Suddenly, The Overseer knew why.

"Not quite," he croaked, and collapsed into a pile of moldering bones.

Suddenly, she stopped screaming. She was now too fascinated to even fear; she was seeing something that no mind could, possibly, ever accommodate and remain wholly intact.

In the air before her, floating in the midst of the blue mist, strange twirling bits of flame seemed to erupt from nowhere. They slowly began to circle before her in the corridor, like some microcosmic imitation of the solar system, until finally they conjoined, and began to grow into each other, forming a horrid, glowing, pulsating flesh.

But inside the flesh, also, deep within the crinkles of skin and the folds of grotesque lumps, she marveled to realize she could see another world begin to take shape. A world history even: of marching armies, hideous beasts, great, god-like beings, treachery, and vast vistas of madness that stretched on limitless, as far as the mind could conceive. She was transfixed by the shifting, myriad images, screaming faces, naked wonders, and

alien landscapes. In the midst of her hypnosis, the strange being twisted itself into a floating mass of convulsing, jelly-like pulp. Within, she now knew, something was waiting to be born.

Cinder came back to consciousness for a moment, shifting out of the delirium of her nightmares, and awaking in the hazy blue world which was born around her. She tried to raise her arm, but it felt like it must be broken, and she winced in pain. Her body felt as if it were dying. Her hand on the end of her arm looked as if it were ten yards away.

"Suede...I need..."

But her voice was meek. She didn't know that Suede was standing, just out of reach a few feet away. Her arm fell back by her side, she huffed a sigh, and fell backward into darkness again.

It had stomped up and down the corridors, smashing and tearing asunder its own kind that dared step in its way.

Where? Where. It wanted these two. To hell with these Big Ones, if they couldn't see the importance of this. His mind had narrowed down into one white-hot beam of kill, and he needed to spill their blood.

Finally, ahead, he could see something that seemed to shift blue, and flicker for a moment. He squinted in the darkness.

And then, by that same blue light, he found his prey.

Suede still stood there, motionless, in rapt wonder.

She had, never before, seen anything so sickening and beautiful in the same stroke. Flesh and bone; blood and skin; birth and death; sex and necropsy. The maddening thing was enormous now; a true unparallel oddity of occult proportions. It was like all the life that had ever existed fighting, at the same time, to free itself from the same primordial egg.

She suddenly vomited. Reeling over, but barely able to lift her eyes from the spectacle.

It made a mad dash for Suede, its huge footfalls echoing down the corridor, its great metal hook-hands poised to strike, to tear, to rip asunder flesh until all that was left was a piteous, howling mass of blood and grue, begging as it lay on the floor, for It to finish the job. It howled its' monstrous gabbling cluck, and leapt in frenzy.

A tiny, gloved hand reached out and grabbed Suede's just as It came barreling toward her.

She suddenly looked down. A small figure wearing some sort of hooded, rubber garb and a plastic apparatus over its mouth and nose, was imploring her to come with it. Her eyes glazed over. He was far less interesting than what she had been looking at.

Suddenly, she saw, just beyond the rapidly evolving being, the huge shape of the freak with the claw hands; the huge, shambling shape that was covered in filth and feathers. And it was running down the corridor directly towards her.

"Come on!" shrieked the strange little shape. "Don't look at it! It will drive you mad! That is not just a Big One!

Not just a Bigger One! Lady, that's the *Biggest goddamned--*
"

But she had already turned, ducked back into the opposite doorway, retrieved Cinder from where she lay on the floor, and followed the strange little shape into the darkness ahead.

It had run madly into the floating mass of flesh; and it felt itself stuck suddenly, as if it had been immersed in jelly. It struggled, slicing easily through the thick, living matter, almost relishing the feel of the hot, wet pulp that issued forth.

The mass retaliated, covering, encircling; engulfing. It was like a hateful swarm of bees now, and it grew heads and hooked fingers, and skinned faces, and it ate It as surely as a hungry feline devours a rodent.

It even ate the shit-caked boots.

Chapter 5

The small figure had led them to a sort of sliding paneled wall, and Suede had plunged in after still carrying the limp body of Cinder in her arms. The strange little figure in the rubber coat kept up a continual babble of excitement as he led the way, from darkness into greater darkness, saying "At Last! At long last! Ia! Ia! The three-lobed burning eye! The Dark Wave have broken through, but the battle is far from over! Ia!"

The hall had narrowed down into a little tunnel, and Suede could hear the steady rush and slosh of water, and suddenly her feet were wet.

The little figure was nearly lost in the surrounding darkness, but she followed his voice. Suddenly, mixed in with his mad, gleeful exultations, Suede could hear--oh, glorious!--the sound of falling rain.

“Come! Come! There isn’t much time!”

Suddenly, just ahead, she could see the dim, shuffling shape of the strange little creature begin to clear in the gloom. A peal of thunder and a mad of flash of lightening later, and they were standing beneath the sodden boards of an outside opening.

Suede clambered up slick, filthy stone steps, still heaving the bulk of Cinder in her arms, feeling the rain pelt her face through the crooked, broken boards of the overhead trap. She turned for a moment, and looked at the strange small man.

The bottom half of his face was almost entirely hidden behind the clear plastic oxygen mask, but what she saw of his eyes, his crinkled, greenish skin, and his hunched, shivering shape, restored, for a brief moment, her hope that seem beings, no matter how strange and frightening they appeared to be, were still worthy of love.

She turned, pushed open the rotten wooden planks above, pounded upward, and into the pouring rain.

She ran down the slick, wet, muddy hill, not daring to look back. Whoever--or whatever--her guide out had been, it had managed to bring her through to an opening on the other side of the fence.

She carried the inert body in her arms through the pouring gale, finally making her way back to her car, not stopping, for once, to think of the madness she had just witnessed, but simply moving forward with the

thankfulness of a dreamer who has just awoken from the grips of an interminable, punishing nightmare.

She thrust Cinder as quickly and gently as she could on the passenger side seat, and then ran around the car, jumped into the driver seat, and reached under the seat.

“Aw shit! Aw fucking shit! Where in the hell are they?”

Her fingers fought the empty space beneath the seat.

“Gotcha!”

Finally, they managed to seize upon the bundle of keys viciously> She pulled them out, fumbled with them for a panicked moment, then got the car started. She gassed the engine, pulled into reverse, fought down the urge to start screaming, and sped away into the night. Toward a hospital. Toward sanity.

“No one is ever going to believe this shit. NO--ONE--IS--EVER--GOING--TO--BELIEVE--THIS--SHIT!” She began to scream and laugh and cry all at the same time. She tried to shove the images of the last few hours away in a safe place. Before she broke down in shock, she had to get them to safety.

The rain pummeled the windshield. She was driving like a maniac. She forced herself to slow down; tried to calm her racing pulse. She thought they were probably safe now, at least, out her on the road.

Cinder stirred in the driver seat, moaned. Suede looked over at her. Good. Maybe the poor thing would be alright, What in hell had hey just witnessed happen in there? She sure as hell didn't know. Maybe someone had managed to slip them both L.S.D. The events , already, seemed to be taking on a strange, half-dream quality.

“But it was no goddamned dream,” she said, out loud.

Suddenly Cinder screamed, doubled over, vomited on the floor of the car. Suede reached over, put her hand on her shoulder, said, "It's okay baby. Everything...is going to be okay. Let it go. Get it out of you. We're safe now.

Suddenly, the girl sat back up straight. She put her hand out, and touched Suede's arm. Suede looked, glanced down at the arm, and realized that something was still wrong. Very wrong. Cinder was most definitely not going to be okay.

The skin looked as if ants were crawling underneath it.

Suede screamed and the car swerved into the blackness by the side of the road.

The world faded out into darkness for awhile. Blissfully unawares, her consciousness seemed to float in a pool of black.

When she awoke, it was with the increasing realization that she lay, immobile, in a bed. And, though her pain had obviously been dulled with massive doses of morphine, she was still aware of its coming and goings, increasingly, by the hour.

It was sometime, in and out of a semi-conscious state, before she was able to talk with her nurses.

They came in to feed her, she being able, finally, to keep down solid food. Both of her arms were in casts. The Nurses and morphine, at least, were nice.

It was maybe a month before she was started, finally, to regain some sense of herself.

The doctor was a tall, balding man with a high forehead. Suede had talked with him in a small, insecure way. He came in one day with a clipboard tucked under

one arm, gave her a cursory looking over, told her it looked as if, despite her accident, she was going to be okay. Nothing wrong internally. Yes, yes, her insurance would cover it. No, no one else was injured. Apparently she had run off the road in the rain, coming back from work.

Yes, she would have to have physical therapy. Maybe she could be discharged as soon as she got up on her feet again, but he wanted to make sure. By the way, did she realize that, oddly enough her former place of employment was destroyed by fire? Hit by a lightning strike. Terrible tragedy. I take it fire safety regulations were not well known by the staff. Some loss of life.

It was some weeks before she was ready to get up and start walking again. The nurses were more than kind, helpful; her physical therapy was going well.

Every day she walked a little more, her hands grasping at the stainless steel rails as the physical therapist, June Albright, cooed over her, thrusting out knowledgeable hands occasionally.

It was lucky for Suede that her insurance held up; she had been banged-up pretty bad in the wreck. Her car had been crunched like a tin can, and she was informed that the "Jaws of Life" had been used to cut her from the car. She had been comatose for at least two weeks. At the outset, they hadn't expected her to live.

"But I'm a tough bitch to kill". she told June Albright. The older woman smiled in the same inscrutable manner as the rest of the staff.

She was starting to enjoy the routine, she knew; it was nice to have no worries, no complaint, to be waited on hand and foot, for a change. She wondered about Cinder; no one had told her anything about another passenger being pulled from the wreck, and she had been too scared to broach the subject.

She looked in vain for a newspaper article concerning her, concerning the fire at Holloway House, concerning the car wreck. There was nothing, and she expressly asked her nurse, one evening, if they had any old papers that reported the accident, and what the police had said.

The nurse simply flashed the same inscrutable smile, and took the dinner tray away. Suede felt a little miffed, but waited to broach the subject again.

Time passed. A month; two months, and she still had no idea about what had happened to Cinder, or what she should do.

It was the change-over of the seasons; Winter was falling back to a retreat from the oncoming Spring, and the rushing warm front turned icy rain to misty fog. She spent a lot of time now limping around, looking out the window as cars passed below in the street.

April showers bring May flowers, she thought to herself, with a tinge of bitter humor. Why am I starting to feel, a little, like I am a prisoner here?

Perhaps it was the lack of any real conversation from anyone around her; the other patients, those that weren't specifically bedridden, looked as if they were shuffling through the days on a heavy cocktail of psycho affective mood stabilizers.

Thorazine.

Seroquel.

“Mind melters”, she said to herself, laughing a little. “Everyone here is on mind melters, even the staff...and I’m next.”

Visiting hours brought no visitors. Well, occasionally a very stilted, strangely artificial family would amble in to speak with someone; maybe a new fish, or an old lady that did little more than sit alone and afraid; afraid of death, afraid of another long, tiring day of silence; afraid of the ticking of the clocks.

Suede spent her days idly flipping magazines, and feeling a deep, rumbling sense of worry grip her. Something was not right about this place. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but she knew, somehow that something had altered substantially since the long, dark time she had spent buried in the stillness of coma.

She had tried to call a friend, an ex-girlfirend, but all she got was a recording and her calls were never returned. She called her lawyer, too, but he was, apparently, on a long vacation in the Bahamas. She spent anxious little hours these days biting her nails.

But the food was good; the drugs, the pain-killers, were also very good. She felt a fog of forgetfulness slip over her more and more, and she realized she was losing herself, in the small hours, to a growing apathy in which she might, conceivably, sink for months.

Television.

Boring paperbacks.

Rec time.

Dinner.

Television.

Snack time.

Sleep.

She scanned the newspapers half-heartedly, but she saw nothing, nothing whatsoever, that related to her or the case of Cinder Rockwell. Her questions, fielded cautiously to the staff, were met with quiet reassurances, and faded, phony smiles. She knew only that she was a patient at Ballard Trauma Center; she wasn't even specifically, sure what city she was in, although she supposed she had been air-lifted to Louisville.

The days dragged on and on; the drugs began to pull an apathetic haze across her reasoning. Her hands shook uncontrollably, and her vision was often blurry and indistinct.

On the bright side, she was, slowly, getting the strength back in her legs; her walking was better, and she could get around with the care of metal crutches that fitted around her forearms.

She had been moved, she supposed, to a recovery ward, but it seemed oddly more like a psychiatric clinic due to the odd assortment of characters that were inmates here. There were scraggly, incoherent men with no apparent injuries except whatever afflicted the delicate organism between their ears.

There were old women who sat endlessly rocking in their wheelchairs, mouthing babbles of God, and Beast, and Armageddon. There was even an occasional, rebellious teenager that seemed like they had been sent straight from some Hollywood casting office.

She had the displeasure of talking with one of them over graham crackers one night before "lights out".

“S’what’s your name , man? My name is *Sssabrina*.”

The kid chewed her gum the way a cow chews it’s cud. She said her name with a sort of hissing, snake-like elongation, as if to say, “Wow, my name is really the best feature I have going for me.” Suede have her a quick once over, and decide that it indeed might be.

“I’m Suede. I was in an accident. A car accident. I think a friend of mine was killed, but I’m not sure.”

Instead of the usual sympathetic word that any normal person had the right to expect as a matter of decency, the strung-out little teenage girl exclaimed, “Far out! That is *so* totally gross. Uh, was their like blood and shit everywhere?”

The girl had filthy, stringy hair that had , obviously, been bleached more than it had ever been washed. Right now it hovered between being orange and off-red. Her eyeliner was thick, and her little, little tits pushed out the front of the gory, blood-dripping pentagram that adorned her heavy metal tee-shirt. What’s more, she had her leg kicked up on the table, as if to say “I’m more than comfortable with making this place my personal clubhouse to sit, idle away my time, and be lazy while I treat everyone around me like shit.” Her feet were dingy grey socks; her jeans were a ratty, greasy mess.

Suede very curtly turned her mouth into a little “o”, and said, “No. I...I don’t remember anything about the accident. I, just barely, remember the last few weeks. If you don’t mind, I can’t really, talk about it...”

“Then why’d you bring it up?”

The kid looked like she had nothing better to do than hammer broken down women with annoying questions.

At one time, Suede reflected, she would have brought this little stray home, tried to teach her to love, and had her feelings, eventually, smashed. No more.

Besides, no amount of love was going to correct what was wrong with this girl. Being a mental case was one thing; being an idiot was quite another.

Suede excused herself, got up and went to her room, barely hearing the young girl mutter something that sounded like, "Creepy bitch."

She went into her room slowly, painfully, eased herself down into her bed. Her legs were much stronger, her body had healed up quite nicely, despite the accident. So: why was she still here?

The days had disappeared, she dimly realized, in a medicated fog, and it was as if she had been forgotten about as much as she forgot about herself. The staff always deflected even the simplest questions they perceived as being "probative".

Every question was always somehow deflected; and then, of course, these meds made you just stop, really, giving a damn about much.

As she slipped between the cool, crisp sheets, she realized, for the first time, that she might possibly be a prisoner here. She wasn't sure which way to turn with this train of thinking, but as she felt the pull of her medication take her down through dark fathoms of unconsciousness, she realized for the first time that perhaps she hadn't survived any "car accident", at all.

What had happened to her? Why was she here? And most importantly: would they ever let her leave?

Her thoughts spun down into darkness, and dreams.

She was sitting in a warm, dim little café , and in front of her, sat two other people.

One was Cinder, or approximated Cinder in the way that dream-people do. She was dressed in a red dress, and she looked very beautiful then. Suede started to put out a hand to touch her, but found she could not move.

“Hello, Suede. I’ve missed you.”

Suede felt a lump grow in her throat. She leaned over, with difficulty, and said, “I’ve missed you too., baby. Where have you been? Can you tell me?”

Cinder looked sad for a moment, then smiled. She said: “Oh, I’ve been hanging around. I haven’t been able to find you. It’s so confusing here. It’s hard to know which way is up, sometime.”

Suddenly, beside them, appeared the form of a very old, very wizened man, wearing a black hat, a black suit, and having a white goatee. Also, the eyes were piercing grey flashes of steel.

Suede remembered him as Mr. Galls. But he looked like he had aged another twenty years or so since last she had seen him.

“Well, it looks like you kids have finally come together after all. You know, I like this place: anything’s possible here--for anybody. I could just snap my fingers, and--voila!”

And he did so, and suddenly, a tall, steaming mug of some liquid that smeled like raspberry sat before him. He picked up the mug, sipped, smacked his withered old lips, and said, “Mm, that’s good. Yeah, this place is great! You do have to be careful, though...”

He didn't explain, but instead sat back in his chair. Suede suddenly realized that the color of his jacket had changed from black to a heavy scarlet. Also, he seemed to have lost a few years of age, as his face shifted subtly.

"There are Ones that are breaking through now, even as we speak, and the situation is getting very dire. Even here, and this is--most often--a neutral zone, of sorts. But I know you don't really know what I'm talking about, so I'll just leave it at that."

He put his long withered fingers in front of him, and Suede noted how long his nails were. Also, they were painted black, and seemed to be slightly curved.

"I didn't bring you here for any trite lessons that the two of you, in your present forms, couldn't hope to understand anyway. No, I brought you here, because, if you'll forgive me, I don't like messy endings."

He leaned very close to Suede now, and she could feel his breath; it was as hot as fire, and smelled like cheap alcohol.

"I brought you here because I'm an old smoothy; a romantic, at heart. I believe all that we see, or seem, is but a dream within a dream. And if you can't share your dreams with someone you love, well, what would be the point in dreaming at all?"

He got up, slowly, and as he did, the table disappeared, and he receded into the shadows of the room, pausing only to snap his fingers again.

Suede found herself standing, facing Cinder. She reached out with one hand, and stroked back the lank, soft strands of hair that had fallen over one eye.

"We've reached the end of the beginning, haven't we?"

Suede didn't know what she meant, but she simply said, "yes. I've missed you. I hope you're alright."

And suddenly, she dragged her into her arms with a ferocious force, and kissed her madly, passionately. And then they danced. And music filled the cool blackness, and not even Galls was any palce to be seen.

This world was theirs, and theirs alone. This moment was all of them, and they'd defied the world and everything in it, she knew that, when she awoke from this dream of bliss, and longing heartfelt love, she would be sent back to that chilling room to look out on the greyness of a dawn that did not see the face of Cinder in quite the same way as she saw it, in her mind's eye.

Those that danced were thought insane, by those who couldn't hear the music, she thought. Where had she heard that before? No matter. She pulled Cinder to her again, and kissed her with every ounce of passion in her being.

And only a short time later the dream faded, and she opened her eyes, and silence reigned once more.

Epilog

If Cinder was alive somewhere, she would, undoubtedly, be dreaming of a day such as this.

Little Jimmie Lund hopped up in bed, turned, looked at the window at the beaming beauty of the day, dressed as quickly and sloppily as he could, put on his sneakers, grabbed his backpack, and pounded downstairs to breakfast.

Mom was in her usual gloomy mood, that morning,

sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette, pretending to be interested in the scant local paper.

“Hi buddy. There’s bacon and eggs.”

She barely looked up. He knew that she had been depressed lately; something about some boyfriend or other. He had failed to really elicit much of a response from her. But he was too young to be very aware of these things, and as he slowly munched his bacon and eggs, his mind began to summon up all the images of fun he sure he would be experiencing today. He was going to ride out to the fairgrounds on his bike, and, hopefully he would be able to find something there good enough to spend his allowance on.

“I’m going out to the fairground this afternoon, Momma. It’s okay, ain’t it?”

She nodded, made sure to tell him to be back well-before dark, and continued to puff on her cigarette. He noticed, as he munched away hungrily, that she bore dark worry lines on her forehead. She hadn’t slept well, he then realized.

“Don’t you get into any trouble out there young man, do you hear me? I don’t want to have to see you brought home in a Sheriff’s car, or something.” She said this without much feeling, her cigarette poised in the air, sending off appealing curls of smoke. A cloud suddenly shifted in the sky, bringing the kitchen into a brief interlude of early-morning gloom.

“I won’t get in any trouble momma. I promise. I just want to ride on some of the rides. Play some of the games. Freddie Walter said they have--oh--*whatchamacalit*, one of those things take you up real high, and drops you down

again then lets you off...Momma, do you know what they call those things?"

She looked to him as if she would be happier back in bed. She forced a smile, said, "I wouldn't know, buddy. I just know that I want my big strong man to be careful. It's a mean world out there, pard. Believe me, you'll find out one of these days..." She trailed off, yawned, scratched her messy head, got up, and started the breakfast dishes. He suddenly felt a little apprehensive.

He wanted to ask her, exactly, what she meant, but instead took a bowl from the cabinet, grabbed the milk from the fridge, found the box of cocoa Puffs, shook it, realized there was still enough for a satisfyingly delicious snack, and poured the contents in. Then he went to sit on the weathered grey rug in front of the television, flicking the buttons on the set until he happened upon a cartoon show that he especially liked.

She stood in the doorway of the kitchen, and looked at him, her heart a confusion of grief and love. His father had not, uh, *been around* for awhile. Bastard. She would make sure he kept on sending the support money on time. Or she would be swearing out a warrant on him.

Jimmie was as oblivious to his father's monthly child support check as he was to the fact that his father hadn't visited him in nearly six months. He only missed him sometimes, right before he fell asleep.

Wile E. Coyote fell over a cartoon cliff to what would have been, under normal circumstances, a certain, instantaneous death

It was maybe an hour later (still plenty of morning left)

when he pulled on his shoes, put a copy of a favorite comic in his back pocket, made his bed, sort of, and ran out of his room, and out to the shed in the back to get his bicycle. The sun was beaming, and the world was getting hot. All up and down Kilickitat Street, people were stirring in the pleasure of a hot Saturday morning. He could hear televisions and radios begin to blare; lawnmowers hummed and buzzed. Old people did old people things and the mailman was circling about with his bag full of bills and his ridiculous gray shorts with the blue side stripes.

Jimmie pushed off onto the sidewalk and got going with the energy and anticipation of a young boy on the way to the fair. He had ten bucks in his pocket (a sum that seemed, to him at least, princely), and he could just taste the cotton candy and hotdog, and soda, and already smell that heavy musky odor of horseshit and frying food that he always associated with the coming of the Fair.

When he finally got to the fairground gates, he made sure to chain up his bike carefully. Already, the lot was about half-full of cars, and the midway was bustling between brightly-colored tents, booths laden with stuffed animals and flimsy junk, and a few interspersed rides farther down.

He paid a scandalously high-price for a clip-bracelet, and hurried his way through the crowds kicking up dust and tripping once or twice over a few inappropriately-placed cables.

He wanted to ride the electric swing, the small roller-coaster, the bumper cars...he would do all of this. But first he wanted to just walk around abit, and get a feel for

the wonders of the day.

He settled on a corn dog and cola, moving in rhythm to the beauty of the merry-go-round music, and suddenly, just ahead, spied what he figured just might be his favorite ride in the entire world. The “Spook House”.

He hurried forward, corn dog and soda clutched tightly in opposite hands, and his eyes grew wide as he took in the garish painting that adorned the metal covering the outside of the ride.

It was like no other carnival art he had ever seen. It was, for the most part, executed with the same skill, and it was as terrifying as the ride itself promised to be. But instead of the stock images of Frankenstein, Dracula, and maybe a ghoul or two, the outside of the ride was decorated with an elaborate mural, depicting an alien race descending from a pitch-black sky that seemed to progress into the distance forever.

Beneath, bursting forth like morbid butterflies from the sepulchral cocoons of the tomb, ragged, deformed bodies pushed their way free from a bizarre, barren landscape that might have been the surface of Mars.

But the centerpiece of the artwork was a grand dragon, an Oriental nightmare of a twisting, reptilian body and strange, hooked claws. And seated upon the back of the floating dragon, a woman dressed in a wild, blood-red robe, whose eyes bore the look of complete, and utter monstrous evil, held in one hand a cup overflowing with (he presumed) blood, and in the other, she seemed to be holding a glowing sphere that lighted everything around her.

Jimmie had never seen anything so ornate in his life.

He had never been to a museum, and his only experience with art was what he saw in cartoons and read in comic books. He knew immediately that he wanted to go on this particular ride and his pulse quickened.

He walked to the ticket-taker, a great burly man with a faded yellow shirt and huge arms covered in tattoos, and showed him his bracelet. The man, a great bald lout with bad teeth and horrible, perpetual ugly grin, nodded, and said, "We had to shut 'er down for a few minutes. But she should be ready to go soon, kid."

He leaned over, and undid the hooked latch of the heavy theatre rope in front of the ride. Jimmie ran up the wooden steps to the staging area, and waited for the cart to come out of the garish, painted door --painted to look like a skull with glowing red eyes.

He was stopped, halfway up, by a character the likes of which he had never seen before. It was a tall--freakishly tall--man dressed in pin-stripe pants, a heavy, old-fashioned black coat that looked as if it once belonged to a mortician, and a tall, black stovepipe hat. His feet were shod in immense, old-fashioned boots, and the nails of his hands were long, painted black, and each nail seemed to have been filed to a razor tip.

But it was the eyes, set deeply into the cadaverous face, that seemed to bore into Jimmie's soul, and leave him standing at the bottom of those three, dusty wooden steps in a kind of idiotic mixture of fear and wonder. They seemed to shift, slightly, as you were looking at them, and he soon realized that it was quite impossible to pin down exactly what color they were. There was a kind of hideous, death-like pallor about the man; the sort of

waxen ugliness that one usually associates with a freshly-embalmed corpse. And, as if that weren't enough, his tie-pin was shaped like a human skull.

"Well, howdy there, young man! Want to take a ride on the Nightmare Express?"

He held out one long, bony hand, and Jimmie took it, not at all liking the dray, cold, withered feel of it. He winced visibly, but continued up the wooden steps to the platform, and waited for the little car to come out the painted metal doors of the spook house, to his right.

"Yes, inside all are welcome, all are welcome! Into the land of nightmares and dreams. Where monsters and devils walk the earth! Come! Come! It'll be a ride like you never forget...Jimmie!"

Jimmie's head shot around, his heart suddenly stepping up a beat, as he saw the tall man had moved over to the ticket-takers booth, and grabbed an old-fashioned microphone that gave his voice a fuzzy, metallic edge. The ticket-taker, moved over to a box of switches at the side of the ride, and cranked a few, and deep within the bowels of the ride, the heavy rattle and whoosh of gears and pistons began to whine, and the sound of the chain that dragged the car beneath the track clanged out like the rattle of old bones in a pine box.

The car (shaped like a plastic knock-off of an old fashioned sleigh, albeit with skeletal arms designs ringing the curling edges) cranked sullenly in front of him, and he slowly, somewhat nervously, all of a sudden, hopped in. He pulled the rusted protection-bar in front of him, and heard the rusty crunch as it clicked into place.

The tall man had been giving his spiel over the

microphone, trying to drum up business, but all of a sudden he stopped, took his gaunt old mouth away from the microphone, pointed upward at Jimmie, and said, “Now, mind you, boy, keep your arms in the ride--and, for goodness sake, DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING! It might take a fancy to your arm, and decide to keep it!”

“Mister,” Jimmie suddenly said, in a small voice which he suddenly realized was far too quiet to be heard. Then, he yelled, “Hey, Mister! How did you know my name was Jimmie? I never told--”

But suddenly he felt the gears grind, the carriage lurch forward, and the machinery of the ride roar into noisy life. The car moved slowly forward, and the tall man continued his carnival barker spiel over the loudspeaker.

Jimmie began to yell, and the carriage slammed into the aluminum doors in front with a monstrous clang, splitting them open as the carriage descended into the dark. Screams and howls were piped in, and the heavy, wild sound of pre-recorded organ music met his ears in the dark.

“He’s gonna get a real kick out of this one, huh boss?”

The fat, tattooed ticket-taker smiled. He was missing several of his front teeth.

The Overseer smile back, nodding appreciatively at his own, deft genius.

Jimmie disappeared beyond the barrier of the ride. Now he was inside the lurking darkness of the spook house. His fingers clutched the rusted bar in front of him tightly.

And then, *everything* changed.

Shock Therapy